# BLENDED LEARNING – THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**Monica CONDRUZ–BĂCESCU[1]**

## Abstract

*This article deals with the issue of blended learning from a perspective less used in the specialized literature, applying blended learning to foreign language learning. There are highlighted several advantages of using this type of learning in the process of acquiring a foreign language, which can be extended to other areas of learning and that meet the central idea of the article, that blended learning is the future in terms of methods, learning strategies and lifelong learning. A big advantage is to have the assistance of a tutor 24 hours a day, managing to combine time saving, space, that an online classic program with the presence of human factor offers, without which the coherent, effective, genuine and lasting learning can not occur. The article also highlights the disadvantages of this concept; an important one being the fact that some students are not familiar with the latest technology. The last part approaches the issue of online platforms that continue to provide ever more useful applications, at affordable prices and tools for language learning. Even if blended learning has been a functional process for about ten years, there are already numerous supporters of this type of learning, particularly in higher education, where the combination of traditional courses and online interactive activities have already been implemented.*

**Keywords:** blended learning, online activities, learning environment, online platforms, educational system

## Preliminary considerations

The exponential development known by information and communication technology in the past decade has led to the registration of a true revolution in the field of e-learning. Due to rapid changes, technological progress and globalization trend of higher education and elimination of boundaries among students, new perspectives were opened to educational practice. Thus, educational practice was completed with modern methods of teaching, learning and assessment methods specific to the information society. One of these methods involves the use of an approach targeted to training in terms of education process. Initially used only as a generic term that referred to the development of electronic medium to provide

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[1] Monica Condruz-Băcescu, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, monicabacescu@yahoo.com

more flexible learning, e-learning has become more than a simple experiment. It was proved based on studies and experimental projects that the use of e-learning together with information and communication technologies gives the opportunity to significantly improve the educational process. At present, e-learning has become a viable alternative to traditional education methods, so that it was adopted by many schools, universities, especially because of the benefits offered by the possibility of continuing education and wide applicability inside the most diverse organizations.

Years ago, another concept entered the dictionaries and soon the daily lives of many people. That concept was "blended learning". The concept of blended learning has emerged in discussions related to education in the early twenty-first century, when the concept of e-learning and virtual classroom began to lose credibility. Although these two concepts had many supporters in the '90s, however, "the end of the century, brought as many opponents, because students were not motivated and responsible enough to make their own activities, feeling isolated and helpless" (Istrate, 2010: 42). Thus, this new blended learning concept was invented not to completely replace virtual classroom, but to add new dimensions to the concept. From the perspective of current reality, blended learning not only responds to daily, full, hectic and difficult to predict programs, to the need of adequate space, but fully exploited or very different in location, but it adds the human factor to the benefits of a classic online program: a tutor available to the participants 24 hours a day. Blended learning is a modern concept of learning, very flexible, developed to provide each student an advanced level of high technical knowledge. The system is based on "concepts and new methods of study, including: study in the classroom assisted by a trainer, self study and online study" (Thorne, 2003: 73).

The article deals with the issue of blended learning from a perspective less used in the specialized literature, namely applying blended learning in foreign language learning. There are highlighted several advantages of using this type of learning in the process of acquiring a foreign language, which can be extended to other areas of learning and that meet the central idea of the article, that blended learning is the future in terms of methods, learning strategies and lifelong learning. In a world in constant motion, where communication, involvement and participation become essential in daily existence and standing aside may not be an option worthy of being taken into account, people need to be permanently connected to information sources of superior quantity and quality. In other words, people need information in large volume and customized to their needs, and that is where the advantages of using blended learning methods interfere.

Blended learning also "represents adapting to your own learning style and the ability to create a personal learning style" (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007: 67). Therefore, those who learn best when they feel and look, those using divergent,

creative thinking, those who use a lot of imagination, receive the cultural resources, need a personal feedback from the tutor that monitors and maximizes their progress. Those who have a rather rational and logical approach, those who are attracted to concepts and ideas, are supported in learning by the fact that each activity is coupled with an explanation of language structure and full access to grammar glossaries. The tutor will always respond to additional questions and this will generate appropriate learning pattern. For those who are always in search of practical utility for ideas and theories, blended learning generates a coherent environment with immediate result of theory transfer in the private, concrete area of personal and professional interest. Blended learning responds to a wide variety of learning styles and needs through flexibility, high adaptability, economy of space and time, taking advantage of human resources.

E-learning is a fairly new concept in the socio-economic context of Romania nowadays. With the transition from the industrial age to the information/knowledge age, we are dealing with a multitude of changes at all levels, including at the level of learning and development. Therefore, from the mid-90s, since Romania has benefited from the introduction of computers, we can say that, day by day, there were outstanding and useful changes for the society of this country. Even if after 20 years, e-learning is still used on a limited scale in Romania and the countries of South-Eastern Europe, it gains more and more ground in the civilized and advanced world in terms of information technology.

➢ The Bucharest University of Economic Studies is currently using blended learning. Here, students in distance learning have this opportunity of face to face tuition and learning from the online platform created especially for them. Distance learning is suitable for students who are already working and who do not have the time to attend day to day classes. At every subject, professors are uploading the materials necessary for self-study. Students can also communicate with their professors and colleagues by means of the online platform.

## *Advantages and disadvantages in implementing the concept of blended learning*

During the first years of concept implementation, this concept referred only to a mixture of classroom interaction and learning in a virtual environment, e-learning. Today, thanks to the widespread use of computers and the internet - intranet networks' improvement, a much broader meaning developed which involves different learning methods combined with the proper use of technology. The approach of education through blended learning transforms classroom interactions in social interactions taking place via the Internet, taking advantage of the technology so often used by students. Instead of waiting for students to come into the classroom, we could, "as teachers, welcome them through courses offered online" (Bonk & Graham, 2006: 88), allowing them to understand that in order to

learn in a social environment, the social networks Twitter, Skype, Facebook, blogs or You-Tube can be used. Thus, teaching and learning activities will be transferred, partially, in a virtual environment.

For example, Richard Clark considers that the activities in the classroom, in the twenty-first century, are closely related to the use of Internet and learning platforms, combining the social and interactive feature of their classroom with the personal learning environment of the students. The social component is provided by media, so that blended learning is "more than just a solitary learning environment, as was the case in distance education" (Clark, 2005: 55). Technology that made possible distance learning (e-learning) has expanded and now there are several options, such as online support systems, databases available to certain groups of students who are provided with a user name and a password. Thus, it encourages combined systems, where "memorable and full of conversation courses taught by teachers, examples, discussions and group work are transferred to education via the Internet" (Rossett, 2008: 126).

It is well known that in the teaching/learning process, teachers should consider students' needs, abilities and accomplishments, but also the time they spend to acquire a certain level of training. At the same time, we shall keep in mind that "each student needs guidance to a certain degree, which is linked to their ability to solve complex exercises, use the instructions and data given, to be creative" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008: 11). Evaluation and feedback sessions are used to complete each student's profile. Therefore, blended learning helps teachers, providing the opportunity to use the time that is spent in the classroom, for evaluation and feedback. Learning experience is based on interaction and practice, so that communication becomes, in fact, the main ingredient of blended learning.

The most important avantages of blended learning are the following:
- ➢ Provides access to courses and seminars from home, or access to training from school/university, individually or in groups;
- ➢ The use of blended learning methods improves the flexibility of students' support ways and management of training programs;
- ➢ It uses better the trainers' skills, as students only ask them for evaluation and to clarify major issues;
- ➢ It is well suited for use in vocational skills;
- ➢ Meetings in classroom can be used for advanced interactive experiences, "while online sections are used for research, homework or controlled practice activities" (Carman, 2005: 5).
- ➢ Due to computers and Internet access, blended learning is increasingly used, especially in higher education around the world, and, also in Romania
- ➢ Another advantage for students is that teachers should be better prepared to present their online courses.

➢ Time management is another positive aspect because teachers must plan their courses taking into account the multimedia component, which implies a longer time than the traditional formula. Moreover, "teachers must really take into account the possible diversity of learning styles and disabilities of students to adapt", (McSporran, King, 2005: 2

➢ Easier access to education, opportunity to interact with people from different parts of the country or around the world, the opportunity to assess more students at the same time;

➢ Increased flexibility because students can choose when they get in touch with the others and when to carry out research on their own, without time pressure that exists in the classroom. This may mean that they can be on the online platform simultaneously.

Blended learning has also disadvantages. Here are some of them:

➢ One disadvantage may be that some students are not familiar with the latest technology, which "does not mean that they are less prepared than others when it comes to the assessment of knowledge gained at the end of the course" (Fat & Labar, 2009: 22). Clear instructions and feedback will help the students use learning platforms and see the advantages of partial replacement of traditional learning environment with the virtual environment;

➢ Students can come with different backgrounds, creating additional problems for the trainers.

## _Online platforms_

Online platforms have progressed considerably in recent years. They continue to provide ever more useful applications, at affordable prices, and tools for language learning. Teachers who use these technologies should continue to provide opportunities for learning and to promote and develop language. However, it is recognized that further research is needed on the impact of technology use. Given the rapid pace of innovations in software and Internet access, long-term research studies are required in order to understand more about the role and impact of technology use in teaching English to adults. Here are some examples of online platforms, which are very helpful for people who wish to attend English or business English courses:

➢ www.englishlink.com/en-us/courses/business-english-courses.aspx
➢ www.talkenglish.com/
➢ www.businessenglishpod.com/
➢ www.better-english.com/exerciselist.html
➢ http://www.oxfordtefl.com/
➢ www.businessenglishonline.net/courses
➢ www.business-english.com/

- www.english-online.org.uk/biz3/bizbhome.htm
- www.englishtown.com/online/business-english.aspx
- www.workplace-english-training.com/
- www.english-test.net/esl/business-english-lessons.html

Further on, I will present two online platforms very useful for the students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. During my English classes, I am trying to combine the classical way of teaching with e-learning and I consider that these platforms are very suitable for being a fluent speaker.

*www.englishlink.com/en-us/courses/business-english-courses.aspx*

The slogan of this platform is "Learn English in English classes with expert Canadian and American teachers". Englishlink "proudly delivers high-quality online English as a second language courses to students in over 200 countries. It provides self-paced Internet learning in a wide range of convenient courses to build your grammar and vocabulary, and develop your speaking, pronunciation, listening & reading skills" (www.englishlink.com).

You can sign up for free. The platform offers General English and Business English courses. You begin the online English lessons with an Englishlink Placement Test that lasts about 45 minutes and assesses your listening and reading skills, and measures your grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The test result tells the level of study. According to the test result you can choose to study General English or Business English.

*Why study Business English with Englishlink?*

*A good knowledge of English is important to succeed in international business. Business English skills are needed for people doing business with English-speaking countries, working in local companies that use English in the workplace, or working overseas. For university students preparing to enter the job market, Business English gives you an advantage* (www.englishlink.com).

Learning Business English online will offer you the possibility to prepare for Business English qualifications like the BEC or LCCI. The levels are lower business English and upper business English. The lessons cover business communication topics such as:

- to make an appointment
- how to socialize at work
- to take a message
- how to make and deliver a presentation
- the main steps of a negotiation
- how to chair a business meeting

> ➤ job interview
> ➤ telephone business conversation
> ➤ how to make a request; to deal with complaints
> ➤ business correspondence (business letters, reports)

### Why study General English with Englishlink?

If you wish to improve your general English skills such as reading, listening, and speaking and your knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, you should study general English before starting the business English course. The platform offers "198 hours of award-winning online general English classes; 24 hours a day from anywhere in the world". (www.englishlink.com) The levels are: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate. General English is suitable for students (and not only) who have to work, study or travel in an English speaking environment or to pass an English exam such as IELTS or TOEIC. Englishlink's general English lessons focus on:

> ➤ how to learn and understand grammar
> ➤ listening and reading skills
> ➤ speaking skills, improving pronunciation
> ➤ learning vocabulary (even slang)
> ➤ using words and phrases correctly
> ➤ how to develop writing skills
> ➤ learning about the culture of English-speaking countries.

The Englishlink platform also offers free English tools: English mini lessons, translation, English to English dictionary, English slang test, English word of the day, resume and cover letters.

*www.talkenglish.com*

In order to become a fluent English speaker, you have to master the following three areas at the same time: reading, listening and speaking. TalkEnglish.com developed the "Click, Listen, and Repeat" system.

*In most of the lessons, you read the sentence, click on the sentence to listen to the sentence, and then you can practice speaking by repeating after the audio file provided by a native English speaker. This proven method strengthens your reading, speaking, and listening all at the same time and makes learning English easy* (www.talkenglish.com).

TalkEnglish.com "provides a complete solution to obtain English fluency using speaking, listening, pronunciation, and basic grammar lessons. It is a program offering speaking lessons on Regular, Business, Interviewing, Traveling Lessons, along with new Listening lessons, Pronunciation lessons, Basic Grammar, and

Intonation" (www.talkenglish.com). Before starting to study the free course, you shall read the following instructions:

- ➢ "Read the contents on the main page
- ➢ Read the 5 Rules for Speaking Fluency
- ➢ Read the material under Study Method
- ➢ Start studying the lessons from Regular English Lessons
- ➢ Ask questions in the forums when you run into something you don't understand
- ➢ Download the TalkEnglish Offline Version and study offline" (www.talkenglish.com).

All these instructions will help you speak English faster and better. The detailed steps on how to study using TalkEnglish.com are the following:

- ❖ *For Regular English, Business English, and Travel English:*
  - ✓ you shall listen each sentence and then repeat the sentences;
  - ✓ after you go through a series of lessons you will see an Interactive Conversation Practice Lesson;
  - ✓ you have the possibility to listen to real life conversations. All the conversations you hear are spoken by native people.
- ❖ *For Interview English and Useful Phrases*
  - ✓ you can choose a question or topic that you would like to study;
  - ✓ read the explanation;
  - ✓ click on each example to listen to the answer or sentence.
- ❖ *For Listening Lessons*
  - ✓ you shall click on the sound or letter you want to learn;
  - ✓ follow the instructions;
  - ✓ click on any sentence or word to hear the sound.
- ❖ *For Pronunciation Lessons*
  - ✓ you shall click on the sound or letter you want to learn;
  - ✓ follow the instructions;
  - ✓ click on any sentence or word to hear the sound.

Business English lessons are focused on people with office jobs. Each lesson is made up of many sentences that you can click on in order to learn how to pronounce them. There are many subcategories of topics. You can play and repeat a sentence as many times you want in order to improve your business English. The topics are the following: office basics, computer related, email, explanations and presentations, meetings, phone calls, talking to coworkers, talking to the boss, talking to subordinates, business trips, review process, quiting or leaving work.

After you pass through the lessons offered by this platform you will be able to speak English in many different situations and communicate effectively. This platform contains the most commonly used sentences that any person can understand. TalkEnglish.com provides you the most used sentences and phrases.

You shouldn't memorize sentences or complex sentences.

I consider that all the above mentioned websites details are important for our university students and for the e-learning process. These online platforms can guide the students to choose e-learning as a means to improve their knowledge in business and general English. At the same time, they are very useful for the individual study.

## *Conclusions*

Since online teaching is so different, "even the most experienced trainers will require a lot of practice before becoming instructors online" (Sharma, Barrett, 2007: 32). Perhaps, it will take some time before most teachers are good at it. Organizations and institutions that offer online courses should be aware of the time needed to properly prepare their trainers. The new information and communication technologies change the perspective on educational practice, completing the education framework with modern learning methodologies specific to information society. E-learning does not want to replace traditional education systems, but to enhance learning process. Adopted in schools as an alternative to traditional education, it led to the formation of distance education. At the same time, it facilitates the training of community members that adopt an e-learning solution. The fact that students must assume more responsibility and that teachers must rethink their course content and their teaching method, represents an advantage for both sides.

Time management is another point that both teachers and students have to acquire. This may cause technical problems, and teachers must work closely with the IT team to support students and to prepare backup strategy, where technology does not work properly. Even if blended learning is a functional process for about ten years, there are already numerous supporters of this type of learning, particularly in higher education, where the combination of traditional courses and online interactive activities have already been implemented.

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**The author**

Dr. **Monica Condruz-Bacescu** is a Lecturer of Business Communication in English at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, where she teaches Business English. She holds a Master degree and a PhD in economics and has taken part in many conferences and symposia with contributions on communication in business english, english literature and economics. She is the author of more than 60 articles and 7 books and co-author of 2 textbooks for students of Cybernetics.