

Blended Learning Mode in Undergraduate Integrated English Course

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With the digital revolution, blended learning is widely adopted in Chinese higher education. The mode has been applied in our undergraduate integrated English course since April, 2020. Based on the teaching practice and a questionnaire survey, this paper analyzes the characteristics of blended learning mode, discusses the new changes and the challenges of it, and aims to forward optimized proposals to explore an integrated blended learning mode in undergraduate integrated English course for English majors.

Keywords: blended learning, integrated English course, questionnaire

Introduction

The rapid development of information technology has led to the dramatic change of education and teaching modes. Since it is proposed, blended learning has been widely recognized and applied. It indicates that the ideology in the international education and technology fields is undergoing another profound change. It also indicates the further development of the educational technology. In the past decade, a large number of online learning platforms have been rapidly incubated in China. The exposure of blended learning has been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Entering into the post-pandemic era, the single traditional face-to-face teaching mode is no longer suitable for higher education. Hence, blended learning has gained increasing prominence in English teaching reform. Based on our teaching practice in Integrated English course and a questionnaire survey among the students of our course, this paper analyzes the characteristics of blended learning mode, and discusses the new changes and the challenges of it.

Literature Review on Blended Learning

Blended learning is a useful complementary resource that uses technology to facilitate interaction and communication which is replacing traditional modes of learning and teaching (Sharpe, Benêeld, Roberts, & Francis, 2006). The learning process can be a combination (or blend) of web-based technologies (such as virtual lecture, collaborative learning, streaming media and text) to realize a teaching objective (Driscoll, 2002). It combines the use of on-line learning with face-to-face person support for a flexible approach to overall learning and skills development (Jara & Mohamad, 2007). He (2004) believes blended learning effectively integrates traditional teaching and digital teaching technology, which not only gives play to the leading role of teachers in the classroom, but also fully reflects the students' subject status in the classroom. It includes the

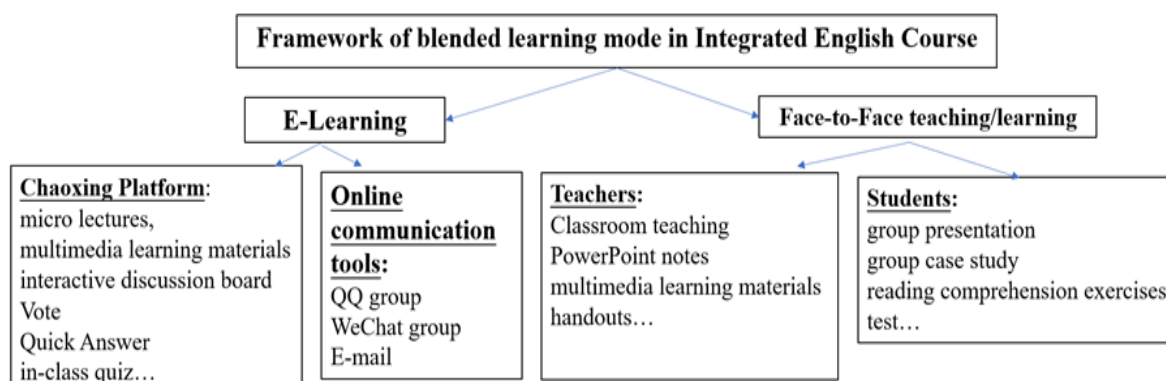
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blending of teaching modes based on different teaching theories (such as constructivism, behaviorism, and cognitivism), the blending of teacher-led activities, and student-centered participation, as well as the blending of different instructional media (Li & Zhao, 2004).

Blended Learning in Integrated English Course

Li (Li & Zhao, 2004) stresses that blended learning does not mean the application of web-based learning merely but to ignore the class teaching; it is not the only emphasis on student-centered approach but to ignore the teacher's leading role; it does not emphasize on the theory of constructivism merely but to ignore the guidance of other learning theories; it is not the only use of online resources but to ignore the use of audio-visual media or other traditional media. Hence, we try to design an integrate blended learning mode with the appropriate blending of E-learning and face-to-face learning components.

Blended learning mode has been applied since April 2020 in our Integrated English course. Chaoxing, an online course learning platform, serves as the technical support. E-learning components and web-based communication tools are applied before, during, and after the face-to-face class. Students are assigned to take various online and offline activities in the whole process of a unit, from preparatory tasks, intensive reading discussion, to review and test.



Blending of Learning Activities

The teaching process of each unit in our Integrated English course consists of preparatory work, critical reading, language enhancement, intercultural reflection and test. In each step, each student should participate in self-study activities as well as group projects. Teachers have designed both face-to-face and on-line activities.

For instance, in order to get a better understanding of the reading passage, students should search information to answer some preview questions for the reading material via the internet. After selecting the effective information, students will complete the preparatory tasks assigned on Chaoxing, the online learning platform. Teachers will view the answers and give feedback before the class and organize the relative face-to face discussion in class. Different from the traditional preview tasks, students can get feedback immediately after teachers' viewing and have the access to view other students' answers. Students can construct knowledge by their own work and increase conceptual understanding by the teachers' feedback and the peers' different ideas. Hence, a better preparation will be made before the discussion in class.

While having the critical reading in class, teachers will also take advantage of some software features on Chaoxing activity library, like "Vote", "Quick Answer", etc. With a smart phone and a learning application, each student has the chance to become a part of the discussion and each one's voice can be exhibited. In

traditional classroom, teachers may only invite several students to answer a certain question. Also, with the support of features like “In-Class Quiz”, teachers can confirm the comprehension condition of the students easily and instantly during the lecture time.

Blending of Learning Media and Recourses

Multimedia can support human cognition. Students’ thinking process and conceptual understanding can be improved in a multimedia environment. Although the use of multimedia in English classroom has already been common, mostly it is related to the slides, audio, or video demonstrations on the big screen in classroom. In the new blended learning classroom, students have access to their own digital devices like laptops, ipads, or even smart phones. The learning materials like course documents, relevant videos, web links are delivered on the online platform, and students can browse the materials whenever they need.

With their own devices, the collaborative learning in class will be performed more effectively. During face-to-face discussion, group members can also share relevant content simultaneously via the network communication tools such as QQ group, WeChat group, or E-mail. Information browsing, selecting, screening, supplementing, and exchanging become convenient and instant.

Micro-lecture is also a major resource in blended learning. Short lectures that illustrate core content are recorded beforehand. Students can study these micro lectures with their own digital devices in their own spare time. It maybe a useful supplement or consolidation of the face-to-face instruction, as well as a good way to inspire students’ autonomous learning.

In short, blended learning mode in our integrated English course combines face-to-face class and e-learning with interactive web-based components. E-learning is put to good use both in and out of the classroom.

Questionnaire Survey on Blended Learning

In order to check the blended learning status of our Integrated English course, a questionnaire survey was conducted via WJX.cn, a professional online questionnaire survey and evaluation platform. 118 respondents completed the questionnaire, and 112 respondents’ questionnaires are valid. All these respondents are the students from English Department, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology. They have attended the course for two semesters. The survey questionnaire identifies factors of access to learning resources, operation stability of learning platform, classroom atmosphere and interaction, and learning effect.

Based on the analysis of the survey results, it can be learned that the blended learning mode has strengths compared with the traditional face-to-face mode, but there are also many challenges.

Strengths

Convenient and abundant learning resources—Most students (98.2%) think online learning resources are relatively convenient and more abundant. 72.64% of them make full use of the resources delivered on Chaoxing platform by teachers and 57.55% of them will search more resources from the internet on their own. Compared with traditional face-to-face classroom, the blended learning mode enhances the flexible access to more learning resources.

Motivated learning interests—Blended learning can improve student-centered learning experience. 87.5% students consider this mode can promote their engagement and make them more willing to ask and answer questions during class. 80.36% students think with the aid of online communication tools, the discussion

atmosphere in class gets more relaxed and electric. The application of various activities with e-learning platform inspires students' attention and motivates their learning interest.

Instant interaction and encouraged collaborative activities—Blended learning mode facilitates an instant interactive teaching and learning environment. 71.4% students think features like interactive discussion board and in-class quiz on Chaoxing platform help them to get instant feedback from teachers and classmates, and hence offer chances for them to adjust learning focuses and strategies promptly. Also, applying e-learning platform and online communication tools promotes peer interaction. 89.29% students prefer using blended mode to fulfill their collaborative activities both during and after class.

Challenges

The stability of learning platform—The dramatic increasing of users challenges the operation of the online learning platforms. There are about 32 million enrolled undergraduates in regular higher education institutions in China. Due to the pandemic, learning platforms undertake a large number of students' learning tasks. Application users of Chaoxing have reached 90 thousand. Maintaining the stability of platform becomes difficult. According to our survey, 71.43% students encounter unstable platform operation, including lag, delay, network disconnection, and network congestion. These problems hinder the quality and effect of e-learning.

The credibility of test scores—Features like in-class quiz and online test offer convenience for both teachers and students. Teachers can get detailed analysis of the test results and students can get instant feedback. 33.93% students admit they turn to help from searching tools on internet while having the on-line quizzes and tests. It's difficult to sense such cheat during online tests compared with the traditional paper tests. How to supervise cheat and ensure the credibility of test scores is a big challenge for teachers and e-learning software designers.

The elimination of distractions—On-line chatting and information searching promote students' collaborative activities during class. Meanwhile, they also can be distractions to students. 51.79% students get to irrelevant chat or information on their smart phones more or less during class discussion. Apart from teaching instructions and activity organization, teachers should guide students to stay focused on their classroom tasks.

Conclusion

Blended learning mode in our undergraduate Integrated English course combines various learning activities and multi-media learning resources both on line and in face-to-face classroom. Different from traditional face-to-face classroom learning, students have access to convenient and abundant learning resources. Their learning interests and collaborative skills are encouraged and motivated. Instant web-based interactions between teachers and students, as well as among students, facilitate flexible and effective learning and promote continuous engagement. But several problems are revealed in blended learning, such as the instability of learning platform, the difficulty of supervision of online test cheat and distraction by irrelevant online information. To perfect this learning mode, efforts and adjustments are needed from both teachers and students. Besides, the technical support also needs to follow, including the maintenance of learning platform, campus network, multimedia devices in classroom, etc.

Blended learning mode does not simply transfer the learning components on line, but constructs a close "online + offline" mixed learning mode, forming an innovative development of higher education. The mode not

only gives full play to the advantages of e-learning, but also achieves the highest efficiency with the lowest cost. The idea of blended learning is to find a unique and effective method to solve specific teaching problems by choosing “the right media”, and then adjust the e-learning to be used in the most appropriate time and place, so as to solve the coordination problem of speed, scale, and effect. In this process, we will face all kinds of challenges, and effective solutions are urgently needed.

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