Blended Mode of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

Education system has been witnessing a sea change in teaching and learning methods since the evolution of technology. Grabbing the attention of learners has become a challenge to the teachers these days as the digital natives have immersed themselves in technology. When teachers exploit technology for teaching and learning purposes, Netizens will concentrate on learning. Besides, this methodology interests the learners to grasp the content at a faster rate than ever before. Blended teaching methods remove the gap between theoretical and practical aspects. As students actively participate in this process, they gain confidence to apply their theoretical knowledge to everyday life situations. Moreover, there is precision in teaching and learning processes. Above all, second language learners find it easier to develop their communication skills.

This paper analyses how blended teaching and learning methods fulfil the requirements of the college students in this modern era.

Keywords: Blended learning, Flipped Classroom, Student centred, Digital Files, Netizens, ICT tools.

Introduction

Blended teaching and learning refer to face-to-face interaction between the teachers and the learners wherein teachers give learning experience through technology. In this learning environment, teachers and learners share the same space. With a view to heightening the effect of teaching and learning methods, teachers use digital tools extensively. Depending on the needs of the learners, teachers select the apt mode and assign both synchronous and asynchronous activities to them. As teachers focus more on the effective delivery of the subject, learners naturally involve themselves in learning the concepts.

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The present education system focuses on student centred approach as that alone can make learners grow intellectually and contribute their skills to the society. With that motto, educationists across the globe have recommended Bloom's taxonomy, which combines lower order, middle order and higher order thinking for the intellectual development of the learners. Of all the methods, blended mode of teaching has the scope for promoting life skills of the learners.

Terminology

Modern age has recorded the evolutionary stages of digital learning tools, which impact teaching and learning methods. Thanks to the learner centered approach, educationists rely more on blended teaching method. This has resulted in coining terms as Martin (2003) puts it "blended learning, hybrid learning, technology-mediated instruction, web-enhanced instruction and mixed mode instruction" (p.19).

Literature Review

The term *blended learning* first appeared in the business world with regard to corporate training opines Sharma and Barrett (2007). Further, they view that flexibility in this type of learning can stimulate younger generation to learn English language with interest. MacDonald (2006) feels that the term was applied to higher education later. Neumeier (2005) refers to blended teaching and learning environment as an amalgamation of face-to-face and technology-based learning. Banados (2006) shows how students projected "improvement in all the skills, especially in listening, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary" (p.542 – 543) when blended learning is incorporated.

Though blended teaching and learning methods are in vogue, the pandemic has reinforced its usage to a great extent. And language teachers find it useful to apply this method to English language teaching.

National Education Policy

National Education Policy (2020) considers that "student is the main stakeholder". In that sense, education system must be reframed to fulfill their dreams and desires. Hence, NEP promotes blended teaching and learning that offers a wide range of opportunities to the personal growth of the learners. As the student-centred approach has flexibility, the heterogeneous group of learners learns concepts at their own pace and space.

English Language Teaching through Blended Mode

Integrating technology into language teaching is effective as it adds precision to second language learning. Thanks to teachers' understanding of their students' standard, learners get apt digital learning materials. A general introduction to the concepts in the classroom teaching

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coupled with the exposure to digital files make learners concentrate more on the subject. Besides, teachers test the grasping capacity of learners through interactive live worksheets.

Technology makes teachers and students exhibit their creativity. Teachers prepare podcast files to meet the learning requirements besides encouraging the students to create the same. This kindles interest among learners. Interestingly, creating blogs and instructing learners to post their views on certain blog posts expose second language learners to practise reading and writing skills. As Dziuban rightly observes, this practice in higher education "has the potential to increase student learning outcomes" (p.5).

Blended Learning Vs. Flipped Learning
Generally, blended and flipped learning are considered to be similar. On the contrary, both are different though the aim of the two modes is to educate Netizens through technology. While blended learning uses digital content to help students learn concepts in the classroom, flipped learning focuses on educating the learners on the concepts to be discussed prior to the classroom lectures. Blended teaching guides students through the process of learning the subjects whereas Flipped mode familiarizes the learners with the subject without the physical presence of the teachers.

In flipping the classroom, teachers create digital materials and share them with students on an LMS – learning management systems like MOODLE or Google Classroom. Students learn the subjects outside of the classroom hours and interact with the teachers to get their doubts clarified. But in blended mode, teachers use digital files to support the topics taken for discussion. Also, they monitor students at every step as to know whether the students learn the subject as they intend it to be. Though there is a slight difference in the methodologies, the ultimate goal of these two methods is to target the attention of the digital natives.

Models of Blended Learning
In Blended teaching, learners get materials tailored to suit their needs. Teachers get quality time to focus on the individual needs. As the new education policy focuses on "ABC – Academic Bank of Credit - that has flexibility and quality, student centricity" (UGC, p.4), it has the power to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical aspects along with encouraging the learners to learn more. Though different models are there in this mode, the paper analyses the popular models.

1. Face-to-Face Driver Model
In this mode, teachers use digital contents to teach syllabus either in the classroom or in the language lab. Online activities will be conducted to make learners involve in reading and

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taking up quiz activities out of the class hours. This model facilitates higher order thinking skills as students engage themselves in discussion and group project works.

2. Rotation Model

Learners have the freedom to rotate between different modalities on a fixed schedule. Either they can go online, learn concepts at their own pace by getting feedback from the teachers as and when they submit the responses to the activities given. Or, they can choose to be inside the classroom getting individual assistance from the instructors. This mode makes second language learners more active in grasping the nuances of English language.

3. Flex Model

This model aims at delivering the major part of the syllabus through online platforms. Teachers facilitate learners either individually or in small groups. This mode encourages introverts and extroverts in acquiring language skills effectively. Besides, students who learnt through vernacular medium get away from inhibitions, which otherwise will be predominant in the traditional class room set up.

4. Online Lab Model

In this model, complete online support is given to learners for teaching the entire subject. Tutors specially appointed to guide students will be assisting them throughout the process. This mode helps students learn many courses simultaneously.

5. Self- Blend Model

Self-motivated students generally prefer to have this mode of learning. Besides attending to traditional classes, learners try to do additional courses related to their discipline through online mode.

6. Online Driver Model

This model provides the learners with the entire curriculum and the learning materials through online.Teachers clarify learners' doubts through online chat. As and when there is a requirement, students meet teachers in the classroom and interact with the latter to have clarification. Learners opt for this mode when they have to spend their time for different activities.

Learning Management Systems

Recent pandemic has exposed academicians to learning platforms like Google Classroom, Black Board, MOODLE, Edmodo, Microsoft Teams etc. Teachers can post learning materials, tasks for assessments, and collect feedback through any of these systems. Open

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educational resources with open license help teachers save time in preparing contents to be shared with the learners.
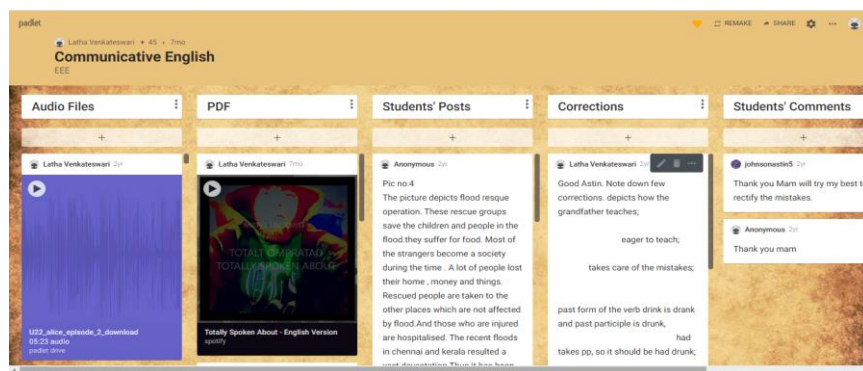
ICT Tools

Teachers and learners can get maximum benefits through the pleothora of ICT tools. In fact, these tools reduce time spent on writing and explaining concepts to second language learners, who generally lack knowledge on spelling and grammar. But the visual presentation of concepts provides the learners with precision in learning. Applications like Google Forms, Google Docs, Kahoot, Edpuzzle, Quizziz, Quizlet, Flubaroo, Socrative and a host of other tools offer a wide range of activities to assess students' performance.

Google Docs helps teachers encourage students' writing skills because of its feature on giving individual feedback. The blended mode of teaching "Visual Interpretation" has got the expected learning outcome from the heterogenous group of first year engineering students. A sample of the writing assignment given to a student is shown below. Highlighting the mistakes and sharing the revised draft with suggestions on how to correct the draft, make leaners practice writing skills rather effectively.
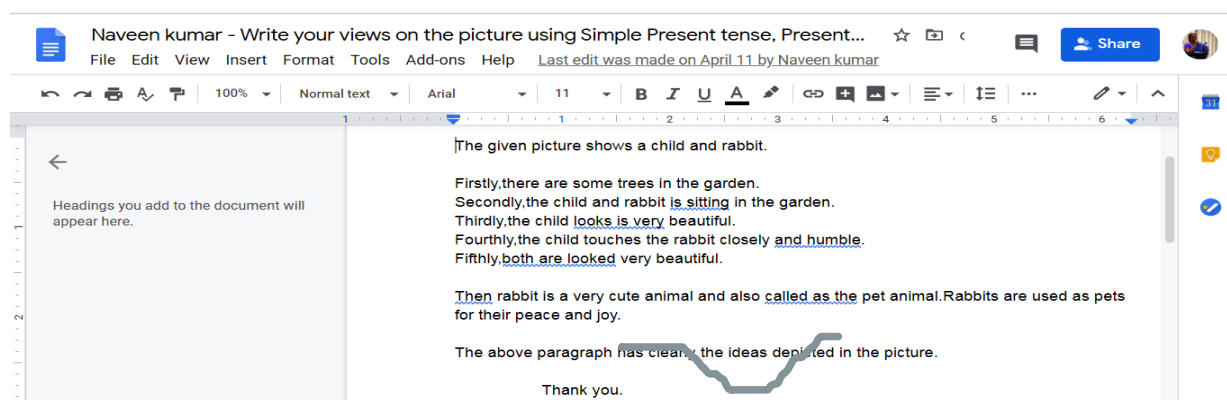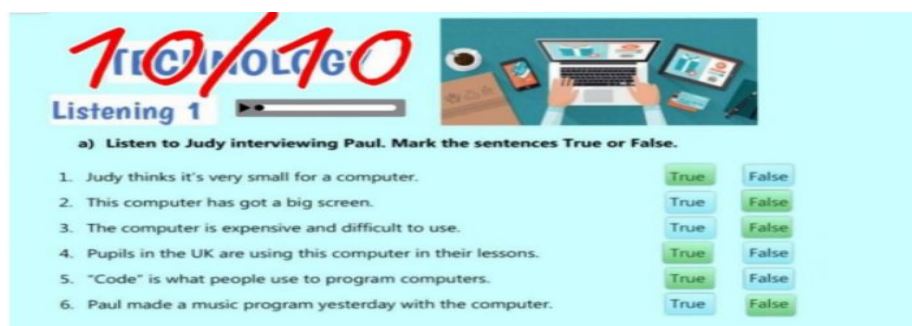

Nearpod and Peardeck enable teachers to have interactive sessions with the students. Padlet supports users with brainstorming, reading and writing activities. Teachers' creativity can bring in as many activities as possible. The following Padlet wall used by the authour for teaching "Communicative English" to first year students shows how teachers can exploit technology to teach English language with accuracy.

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Tools like Screen Castomatic, Loom, Screen Castify, Free Cam 8 etc. help users prepare video files. TED Ed has the facility to check the understanding of students at different points of the video content by making them answer questions. The picture given below shows the creativity of the authour in explaining and testing the learners' understanding of the concept "Process Description".
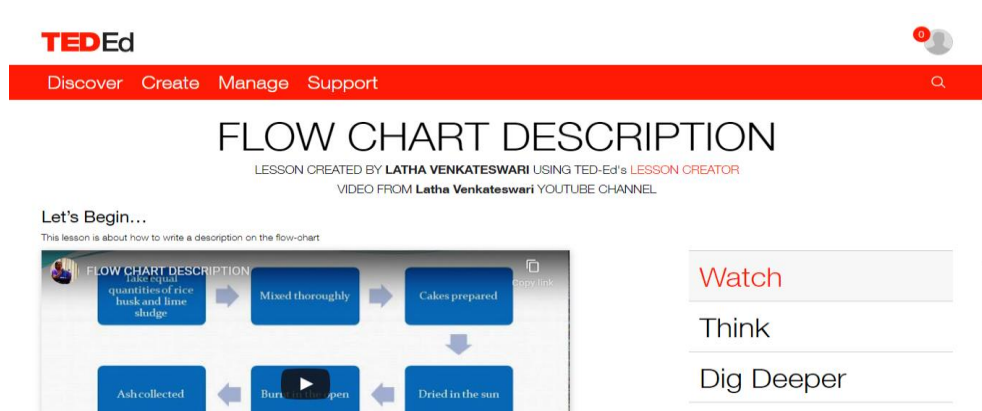
Teachers and learners get maximum benefits through Live Worksheets as the users get a variety of exercises with instant feedback and score upon submitting the exercises. The picture given below shows the score of a first year student related to a variety of activities on listening.

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When teachers and learners use ICT tools, they can easily keep pace with knowledge explosion.

Role of Teachers

Teachers play a key role in making this blended mode cater to the needs of the students. Making learning a tech-based one is rather challenging. Yet, teachers' knowledge about the level of their students can help them prepare apt digital files. They can aim at preparing interactive work sheets. Selecting the mode of delivering the contents relies on the teachers' discretion. Moreover, it should be ensured that the students are motivated and participate in the activities.

In blended learning atmosphere, teachers support students individually, which, in turn makes them active. Interactive sessions with the learners improve teacher-student relationship. Teachers make every single effort to identify the challenges faced by students in mastering the subjects. This helps learners eliminate the barriers and implement the right methods for learning. As a result, students develop the skill of self-reliance as well as self-learning. Alongside, teachers take the credit of channelising the potential of students towards productivity.

Role of Learners

Netizens find this mode of learning quite interesting as they get a chance to be with their smart devices, which have become a part of their existence. Students remain more attentive and glued to their digital learning materials than the contents offered through traditional texts. They are able to set their goals; remain internally motivated; and take up responsibility for their learning as they learn subjects at their convenience.

Since technology has impacted the lives of learners irrespective of their rural background, or status as first graduates, learners find it easier to apply their theoretical knowledge to real life situations. As this process of learning gives importance to understanding the concepts and logically sequencing them, learners do away with rote learning. Also, they get the urge to learn more, develop research skills and sharpen their decision making aptitude. In short, blended learning transforms the learning capacity of the learners getting higher education.

Merits

This mode of teaching offers teachers and students innumerable benefits. Students engage themselves more in this process than the traditional teaching methods. Flexibility in this mode gives them time for doing additional courses besides the main course. Virtual reality of this mode encourages self-learning and students tend to become continuous learners. Assignments based on colloborative learning develop inter-personal skills, which make students competent enough to take up the future challenges of their profession.

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Teachers find it easier to integrate Bloom's proposition of lower order, middle order, and higher order thinking. Preparation of learning materials gives self-satisfaction to teachers. Alongside, they train students to become good citizens as this methodology brings in considerable changes in the social and academic behavioural patterns of students. Learners prove their creativity and productivity in this process earning reputation to the institutes as well.

Blended mode helps teachers give the best inputs to the students and makes the latter contribute the best outputs to the society. As Neil Selwyn rightly points out, "any digital technology has the ability to change things for the better." (p.33)

Challenges

Initially, teachers have to spend time either for preparing or selecting apt digital files. This demands interest, dedication and technical knowledge. Secondly, teachers must be careful about copy right issues while publishing their content online or using others' works for teaching. Thirdly, they must be prepared to devise activities when technology fails. Fourthly, they have to monitor the progress of the learners or else students might get demotivated and lag behind. Finally, teachers tend to assign more tasks overlooking the time limit needed for completing the assignments. Taking into consideration the attitude of the youngsters and the current demands of the education system, teachers must find ways to ovecome the challenges and make blended mode of teaching and learning effective.

Summation

Education system undergoes a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning processes. The blend of technology and face to face interaction will be an attempt to sync with the ever changing life style. Since electronic gadgets like smartphones, tablets, and laptops have become intrinsic to our existence, it is high time we changed our methodology of teaching and learning. This reinforces Christine Meloni's view that "Technology will never replace teachers. But teachers who use technology will replace those who don't" (Vai, p.17)

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