

# Spotlight on Blended Language Learning: A Frontier Beyond Learner Autonomy and Computer Assisted Language Learning

Elke Stracke  
*University of Canberra, Australia*

## Abstract

This paper offers key points to consider in Blended Language Learning (BLL) environments, defined as teaching and learning environments in which technology plays a role. The pedagogical rationale behind BLL is the desire to allow for a higher degree of learner independence in the teaching and learning of second/foreign languages. Based on an empirical study, the paper suggests the following key points for teachers, researchers and administrative staff in charge of implementing technology and a higher degree of learner independence: complementarity, variety of media, class community, flexibility as regards time and space, choice, change of roles, high-quality technology-enhanced materials, technical support, and, most importantly, time for students and teacher to adapt to and develop in the BLL environment. The paper argues that BLL deserves more attention in future research as a promising way of truly integrating (computer) technology and independent learning into everyday second and foreign language learning and teaching.

---

## Introduction

Blended learning (BL) is a recent term in education and normally refers to teaching and learning contexts that use computer technology. Based on insights into the experiences of teachers and students, this paper offers an account of, and recommendations for key points to consider in a specific Blended Language Learning (BLL) environment in order to meet the challenge of working in such a new teaching and learning setting. The intention is that the research reported on here can assist teachers, researchers and administrative staff alike in understanding what to aim for, anticipate and be mindful of when implementing a BLL environment. Furthermore, I will argue that BLL is an under-represented area in the field of independent learning and learner autonomy and thus deserves more attention in future research. BLL should not merely be understood as a platform for developments in the relationship between learner autonomy and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL); it can, in fact, serve as the starting point for *any* language learning and teaching environment that favours an integration of technology, be it 'older technologies' like audiotapes and videos, or recent ones, such as Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), podcasts, or Wikis and blogs, etc. Also, I suggest developing the theoretical understanding as well as the practical application of BLL as a way towards (more) learner-centeredness and autonomy, and thus to educational change.

The paper takes its lead from the observation that educators, teachers, and administrators in charge of management, curriculum and professional development within the foreign and second language learning sector are interested in (better) integrating technology into language learning and teaching, with the overall goal being to develop more learner-centred approaches that make the most of technological innovation. Working with teachers of English in Australia, China, and Vietnam has further supported my belief that increased reflection (by both researchers and teachers) and guidance for teachers is needed, if one wants to initiate, in these and maybe other

countries, a successful implementation of technology into those teaching and learning environments fostering learner independence. Hence, my investigation of BLL is pedagogically driven.

This paper begins with a short explanation of the nature and importance of BLL, followed by a brief summation of results from my previous research into BLL. This research describes the experiences of both learners and teachers in a particular BLL environment; namely within a European (German) higher education context. In this example of BLL, the components consisted of learners' independent self-study phases at a computer (with a CD-ROM)<sup>1</sup> and traditional face-to face (F2F) classroom learning. In a third step, extrapolating from the research base at the German university, the paper offers a list of pragmatic points to consider when working in a BLL environment. Although the degree to which technology is being used in the societal and educational context of each reader will differ, this list provides a quick, valuable reference for anyone interested in (better) implementing technology in their particular context and aiming for a higher degree of learner independence. Finally, I will conclude by emphasising the need for research into BLL as a way to foster independent learning and learner autonomy in the classroom context.

### **The Nature and Importance of BLL**

BL brings together classroom and technology as essential partners in learning and teaching. Combinations of two or more approaches to learning are nowadays often referred to as 'blended learning'. Often, BL is also referred to as 'hybrid' or 'mixed' learning (*Blended learning*, 2004; *Blended learning*, 2006; for a good overview of various definitions, see Harvey, 2004). Even though BL is a recent term in education, the concept of using more than one delivery method, like F2F and computer, is obviously not new. Indeed, as Neumeier (2005) rightly states the 'approach of blending CALL applications with face-to-face (FtF) teaching is as old as CALL itself', and 'most language learners experience CALL within a BL environment' (p. 163). As a new frame of thinking, BLL draws on the use of different media and different modes of working.

BL normally refers to teaching and learning contexts that use computer technology. I suggest BLL as an inclusive research framework that caters for low-tech and/or high-tech environments, as well as more recent technological innovations that might include computers (like, for instance, the introduction of Wikis and blogs; see Zorko, 2007).

The concept of BLL has thus far not received the attention it deserves (Neumeier, 2005; Stracke, 2007). Even though the use of technology in second/foreign language learning can indeed be considered a *sine qua non* for modern second/foreign language learning, its implementation is an ongoing process in many learning and teaching contexts where technology is still to be fully integrated in the teaching and learning context. A steady rise of practical applications of BLL (Neumeier, 2005; see also, e.g., Hotter; 2005; Lamping, 2004 as practical examples) contrasts with a striking lack of research into BLL in Applied Linguistics, an 'obvious lack of theoretical conceptualisation, of a research agenda, and of qualitative research' (Neumeier, 2005, p. 164). The gap is less pronounced in the broader context of education (Graham, 2006; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005; Stracke, 2007).

---

<sup>1</sup> Two computer programmes (CD-ROMs) were used in this project. From today's point of view, CD-ROMS can be described as relatively old technology. Both programmes (*Think and talk*, *Learn to speak*) are for beginners, written for self-study purposes, and present the material in a structured way. The computer basically plays the role of tutor in delivering materials to the learner. Both CD-ROMS are early CALL software reflecting a behaviouristic approach to language learning. In this research, the actual situation as it presented itself at the research site was investigated and, hence, drew upon resources (i.e. software programmes) obtainable at the time, as opposed to what might or should have been available, and what one might consider desirable, be it at the time or with today's wisdom. Also, it seems noteworthy that in many parts of the world, CD-ROM technology is still considered rare and new.

As to the reasons that have been promulgated to pick BL over other learning options, one can cite a number of strong reasons why it can be regarded as an effective learning and teaching environment. Graham, Allen & Ure (cited in Graham, 2006) discuss three main reasons for choosing BL: '(1) improved pedagogy, (2) increased access/flexibility, and (3) increased cost effectiveness' (para. 14). Business and academic circles will emphasise different reasons for their choice of course delivery (cf. Namenwirth, 1997; Reinmann-Rothmeier, 2002); educators will no doubt emphasise the pedagogical rationale for BL that lies in the encouragement of more student-centred approaches to learning. This applies to the study into BLL that I conducted, the results of which are summarised in the following section.

## Results from Previous Research

In my mainly qualitative research I have described and emphasised the views of participants (the experiences as expressed by the 'field-players'—the learners and teachers) in a specific BLL environment, for all of whom BLL was a novelty (refer to Stracke, 2004; 2005; 2007 for more detailed discussions of results, as well as for a detailed description of the methodology and research procedure). The following is a brief overview of the results enriched by quotes from my database for the purpose of illustration.

### *Students' Views on BLL*

The students surveyed (N = 190) and interviewed (35 interviews with 32 students) had an overall favourable attitude towards BLL. They valued the BLL environment with its independent learning features, like, for instance, temporal and spatial flexibility or choice, and they showed awareness of their reasons to learn (Stracke, 2005). However, students who perceived a mismatch between the blend 'components,' a lack of support, and/or a lack of print medium usage would leave the class (Stracke, 2007). The most important qualities of the successful BLL environment, as valued by the learners, were

1. the complementarity of F2F and independent learning phases;
2. the use of a variety of media (electronic (computer) and printed materials);
3. the class community;
4. flexibility as regards time and space;
5. the possibility of making independent choices; and
6. a teacher's presence and guidance.

Furthermore, students emphasised the importance of multimodal, interactive CALL and excellent technical support. In the following, each of the six main qualities listed above is illustrated by two quotes (for space reasons, I only give here the approximate translation into English) from the student survey and/or interview data.

#### 1. The complementarity of F2F and independent learning phases

##### *Example 1* (Questionnaire 41, SS 1995)

I find the conceptualisation of the [two] phases of learning (independent preparation at the computer and revising and supplementing during classtime) very positive.

##### *Example 2* (Q 94, WS 1997/98)

I enjoyed the course. In particular that we had, in addition to learning in the computer lab, the opportunity of asking questions every Wednesday and to work communicatively.

## 2. The use of a variety of media (electronic (computer) and printed materials)

### *Example 3* (Interview/Ulli/130700)<sup>2</sup>

But I would for example, I believe, when learning a language, I would not limit myself to this programme. Either a teacher as well or a book. Or both.

### *Example 4* (Interview/Theo/120296)

And—this is actually a personal thing, I actually also find—that one can learn quite well with traditional media.

## 3. The class community

### *Example 5* (Interview/Joseph/120296)

By myself, I wouldn't have learnt any vocabulary, if I hadn't attended the class. Would definitely not have inserted the CD.

### *Example 6* (Interview/Birgit/120296)

Um, well what is good, of course when comparing it with working with the computer, to start with, that one is part of a group, that one can exchange ideas, and that it is simply fun to work on something together. And that, um, one can resolve tasks, um, also cooperatively.

## 4. Flexibility as regards time and space

### *Example 7* (Questionnaire 96, WS 1997/98)

A nice change, one can manage one's time oneself, when to work with the computer.

### *Example 8* (Interview/Karmen/150798)

You can steer your learning yourself. This is pretty good with the programme [software]. That you can somehow [say], 'Yes, today I will go to the language centre and do that and...'

## 5. The possibility of making independent choices

### *Example 9* (Questionnaire 97, WS 1997/98)

Overall however, I have enjoyed it [the course], because one can manage one's learning individually.

### *Example 10* (Interview/Theo/120296)

And/but finally, um, I skipped fifteen lessons or so, in the computer programme. [...] Well before that I did not like the programme at all. But then it was again a bit of fun, the computer programme.

## 6. A teacher's presence and guidance:

### *Example 11* (Interview/Renate/140296)

And during class time there is after all a direct contact person, and furthermore, through the classroom conversation, well, that you...

### *Example 12* (Iv/Uta/140296)

If there is no pressure [referring to the importance of her teacher's presence], you simply don't do much.

---

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

The learners' experiences of BLL can best be described as charting a course between the unknown/untried and the well-known/accepted. Referring to the six interview/questionnaire extracts noted above, the unknown or new elements were the independent learning phases (example 1); the use of new technology (example 2); a higher degree of flexibility (example 4); and choice (example 5). Meanwhile, the well-known elements were the much appreciated aspects of F2F (example 1); the use of print materials (example 2), the class community (example 3); and the presence and guidance of their teacher (example 6).

### *Teachers' Views on BLL*

The teachers' experiences focus on the issue of change, and their willingness to accept substantial changes to their role in the classroom. Whereas some teachers perceived and experienced changes in their teaching, and in their role as a teacher, others did not. Their evaluation of the multimedia materials used likewise covered a wide range of reactions (Stracke, 2004). Furthermore, the usefulness of the idea of BLL (e.g. importance of independent learning, learner-centeredness) as experienced was acknowledged by the teachers, but the further application of the idea in their future teaching practice varied (Stracke, 2009). Overall, the teachers were more critical of the BLL environment than their students. The two most important qualities of a successful BLL environment, as valued by the teachers, were:

1. The high level of involvement of students; and (closely related)
2. The teacher as facilitator assisting students in their learning process.

Furthermore, teachers emphasised the importance of methodologically sound software as well as good technical support. Below, a few salient quotes from the teacher interview data (total of 22 interviews with 9 teachers) illustrate the two above-mentioned main qualities of a successfully developing BLL environment. The two examples arise from two interviews conducted for each teacher (Manuel and Beatrice) respectively. It is interesting to observe how these teachers slowly developed their views of, and teaching practices in, the BLL classes they were teaching at the time. Manuel's thoughts were recorded in interviews that were more than two years apart:

#### *Example 13 (Interview/Manuel/031297)*

Of course, that [the teaching] is totally different. That you don't have to bang it into their [the students'] heads, but that they learn, yes, that they learn themselves. That they come to class with some knowledge. This is beautiful, this is pleasant. And easier. This is easier for me.

#### *Example 14 (Interview/Manuel/150200)*

Well, I can say that the people [students] who work with the CD-ROMS, um, are more independent. This is, is very important, also during class time, that they do not ask for everything, but that they think for themselves. They, they yes are more active, and they use more their [own] head.

Beatrice made the following comments in interviews that were also recorded over a two-year time span:

#### *Example 15 (Interview/Beatrice/191198)*

Well, I think that we have warmed up to each other, and that they [the students], um, have warmed up to the, to the approach or to the method, that I do not teach frontally, because at the beginning there was actually a lot of demand for grammar explanations, and they always said that they wanted to learn the system and what I would explain to them.

*Example 16* (Interview/Beatrice/010900)

And because that they from the beginning had to rely on coming to their own conclusions and, um, also to develop a higher degree of tolerance towards things that were not always clear and not always explicit, they were also more flexible afterwards, that is, well, when they did something new.

### **Important Points When Contemplating the Implementation of BLL**

Based on these brief summaries of qualities that students and teachers value in a BLL environment, I offer a list of pragmatic points to consider when making the decision to implement a BLL environment. It is worthwhile iterating that this list is designed to be helpful in any BLL environment—i.e. any environment that uses technology as an integral part of the environment, regardless of the level of technology applied—and that wishes to allow learners a higher degree of independence in their learning of a second or foreign language. This list provides a quick, valuable reference for any teacher and administrator interested in (better) implementing technology in their particular context:

1. Complementarity

Teachers need to make sure that the different ‘ingredients’ of the blend complement each other. If students perceive a mismatch between the various components, this can lead to them being confused, frustrated or even dropping out of the course.

2. Variety of media

Students like to use different media. Newer technologies and older media both have a place in a BLL setting where learners can choose the medium that best suits their needs. Teachers need to vary the usage of such media to accommodate student needs.

3. Class community

Students enjoy learning a language as part of a learning community. Teachers and administrators need to provide F2F contexts that foster such a feeling of belonging. The F2F component in BLL emphasises the human factor in language learning.

4. Flexibility as regards time and space

Students appreciate the high degree of flexibility they experience in a BLL environment. Ideal teachers provide as much flexibility as they can when planning and conducting their BLL class.

5. Choice

Students like choices. Choices allow them to take charge of their learning and feel more responsible. Offering as many choices as possible seems crucial for a BLL environment that is aiming to foster learner independence.

6. Change of roles

As students and teachers experience changes in their respective roles in the BLL environment, they might need to adapt so as to negotiate these new roles.

7. Technology-enhanced materials

The choice of materials cannot be overestimated. Interactivity and multimodality seem crucial to convince learners that (computer) technologies have something to offer them within the language learning

framework. Teachers need to evaluate educational materials such as software programmes most carefully and use only those materials that are methodologically sound.

#### 8. Technical support

Whenever technology is involved—and this is the case in any BLL environment—things can go wrong. Technical support needs to be available and be provided by experts. Teachers and students need this support in order to feel comfortable in what is a new and challenging experience.

However, the most important point to consider is still to be added. This last quality of a successful implementation of a BLL environment is indeed the result of what can be considered the most substantial problem for students and teachers when learning and teaching for the first time—and indeed for long afterwards—in a BLL environment:

#### 9. Time to develop

It is often overlooked that teachers and students simply need (more) *time to adapt to and develop in a new teaching and learning environment*.

I noted earlier that students, when experiencing a BLL environment, navigate between coming to terms with the unknown (and untried) and holding onto the well-known and accepted aspects of language learning. Students are willing to accept change, but want their 'older style' learning preferences to be respected, otherwise a mismatch of expectations versus study experience can result in the sad prospect of students leaving the course despite high motivations (Stracke, 2007). Going through this change needs time. This is even more the case for the teachers, most of whom are well aware of the changes they experience when teaching in a BLL environment. This can be explained by what in post-method pedagogy is referred to as teachers' personal theories of teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) or, with regard to online teaching, the teachers' 'own style' (Hampel & Stricker, 2005, p. 317). Simply put, teachers want to teach according to their teaching philosophy. I believe that, as teachers and educators, we develop our teaching philosophy while teaching; hence, over time.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to underline the importance of understanding that educational change is a slow process. Adapting to a blended learning environment takes time. It is an evolution, not a revolution; yet it can still lead to a paradigm change—the change from an instructivist to a more-learner-centred (and hence constructivist approach) to teaching and learning second/foreign languages.

For future research, this paper echoes and supports Graves's (2007) call for more attention to be paid to the issue of *time* and the importance of *development* when researching independent learning. I believe that BLL environments deserve more attention in future research projects as a promising way of truly integrating aspects of independent learning into everyday second and foreign language learning and teaching. (Action) research projects in close cooperation with teachers might be the best way forward to allow teachers to develop *their* teaching philosophies at *their* own pace. Only through such developments will teachers become 'managers of change' (Holec, 2007) and slowly move from a traditional instructivist way of teaching to a more constructivist understanding of learning and teaching. This process might indeed reduce the tension created by that underlying dualism between the unknown and untried versus the known and tried that students and teachers experience when respectively learning or teaching in a BLL environment. This overall tension is evident from my own research despite the huge variety of individual approaches. It seems that

finding the right balance between the two poles of such dualism is an ongoing challenge for students and teachers alike.

In addition, research into BLL can only serve to further our understanding of the relationship between learner autonomy and CALL (Benson & Lor, 1998; Blin, 1999; Cotterall, 1995; Dhaif, 1990; Schwienhorst, 2007; White, 1999). Furthermore, it might also serve as the starting point for *any* learning and teaching environment (low-tech and/or high-tech environments) that favours an integration of technology and also seeks to foster learner independence.

The key points and perspectives presented in this paper may assist current and prospective second and foreign language teachers, researchers, and administrative staff in understanding what to aim for, expect and be aware of in relation to BLL.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the teachers and students involved in this project for their cooperation. I always enjoyed my conversations with them. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this paper, as they helped me to clarify some important issues.

### **The Author**

Elke Stracke is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL/Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at the University of Canberra, Australia. She taught in New Zealand, Australia, and Germany before joining the University of Canberra in 2007. Her research interests include blended language learning, independent learning and learner autonomy, the use of computer technology in language learning, students' and teachers' beliefs, language teacher education, and post-graduate supervision development.

## **Appendix**

### *A list of software*

*Learn to speak French* v. 4.02, 1994. Knoxville, TN: Hyperglot.

*Learn to speak Spanish* v. 4.02, 1994. Knoxville, TN: Hyperglot.

*Think and talk French*, 1986. Knoxville, TN: Hyperglot/Berlitz.

*Think and talk French*, 1991. Knoxville, TN: Hyperglot/Berlitz.

*Think and talk Spanish*, 1986. Knoxville, TN: Hyperglot/Berlitz.

*Think and talk Spanish*, 1991. Knoxville, TN: Hyperglot/Berlitz.

## References

- Benson, P., & Lor, W. (1998). Making sense of autonomous language learning. *English Centre Monograph, 2*. Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong.
- Blended learning. (2004). In *Zeix-Internet-Lexikon*. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from <http://www.zeix.ch/de/lexikon/blended-learning/index.html>
- Blended learning. (2006). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Blended\\_learning&oldid=309749865](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Blended_learning&oldid=309749865)
- Blin, F. (1999). CALL and the development of learner autonomy. In: R. Debski & M. Levy, (Eds.), *World call: Global perspectives on computer-assisted language learning* (pp. 133-147). Lisse: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Readiness for autonomy: Investigating learner beliefs. *System, 23*, 195-205.
- Dhaif, H. A. (1990). Computer assisted language learning: A client's view. *CALICO Journal, 7*(4): 67-81.
- Graham, C. R. (2006). Chapter 1: Blended learning systems: Definition, current trends, future directions. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from [http://www.publicationsshare.com/graham\\_intro.pdf](http://www.publicationshare.com/graham_intro.pdf). In C. J. Bonk & C. R. Graham, (Eds.), *Handbook of blended learning: Global perspectives, local designs* (pp. 3-21). San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.
- Graves, K. (2007, October). *Collaborating for autonomy in teaching*. Keynote address at the Independent Learning Association's Third International Conference, Chiba, Japan, October 2007.
- Hampel, R., & Stricker, U. (2005). New skills for new classrooms: Training tutors to teach languages online. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 18*, 311-326.
- Harvey, L. (2004). *Analytic quality glossary*, Quality Research International. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from <http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/>
- Holec, H. (2007, October). *Autonomy in language learning: A pedagogical revisiting of a pedagogical approach*. Keynote address at the Independent Learning Association's Third International Conference, Chiba, Japan, October 2007.
- Hotter, V. (2005). Erfahrungsbericht über Blended Learning im Fremdsprachenunterricht: Erste Schritte für berufsbegleitend Studierende von der Realität in die Virtualität und wieder zurück. In: M. Ó Dúill, R. Zahn & K. D. C. Höppner, (Eds.), *Zusammenarbeiten: Eine Festschrift für Bernd Voss* (pp 193-218). Bochum: AKS-Verlag.
- Lamping, A. (2004). *Blended language learning: A report by Alwena Lamping, Academic Director: Get talking*. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from [http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/tutors/blended\\_learning/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/tutors/blended_learning/)
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Namenwirth, E. (1997). Autonomie et nouvelles technologies: Alliance fortuite? In D. Little, & B. Voss, (Eds.), *Language centres: Planning for the new millennium. Papers from the 4<sup>th</sup> CERCLES Conference, Dresden, 26-28 September 1996* (pp. 51-57). Plymouth: CERCLES.
- Neumeier, P. (2005). A closer look at blended learning: Parameters for designing a blended learning environment for language teaching and learning. *ReCALL, 17*, 163-178.
- Oliver, M., & Trigwell, K. (2005). Can 'Blended Learning' be redeemed? *E-Learning, 2* (1), 17-26. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from [http://www.wwwords.co.uk/elea/content/pdfs/2/issue2\\_1.asp](http://www.wwwords.co.uk/elea/content/pdfs/2/issue2_1.asp) - top
- Reinmann-Rothmeier, G. (2002). Mediendidaktik und Wissensmanagement, *MedienPädagogik*, October 30, 2002, 1-27. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from <http://www.medienpaed.com/02-2/reinmann1.pdf>

- Schwienhorst, K. (2007). *Learner autonomy and CALL environments*. New York: Routledge.
- Stracke, E. (2004). Voices from the classroom: Teaching in a computer-assisted foreign language learning environment. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 10(1), 51-70.
- Stracke, E. (2005). Conflicting voices: Blended Learning in a German university foreign language classroom. In M. Ó Dúill, R. Zahn, R. & K.D.C. Höppner (Eds.). *Zusammenarbeiten: Eine Festschrift für Bernd Voss* (pp. 403-420). Bochum: AKS-Verlag. Also published in L. Miller (Ed.) (2007) *Learner Autonomy 9: Autonomy in the classroom* (pp. 85-103). Dublin: Authentik.
- Stracke, E. (2007). A road to understanding: A qualitative study into why learners drop out of a blended language learning (BLL) environment. *ReCALL*, 19, 57-78.
- Stracke, E. (2009). Communicative validation of interview data. In H. Chen & K. Cruickshank (Eds.). *Making a difference: Challenges for Applied Linguistics* (pp. 188-198). Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- White, C. (1999). Expectations and emergent beliefs of self-instructed language learners. *System*, 27, 443-457.
- Zorko, V. (2007). A rationale for introducing a wiki and a blog in a blended learning context. *CALL-EJ Online* 8(2). Retrieved October 1, 2008, from <http://www.tell.is.ritsumei.ac.jp/callejonline/mod/resource/view.php?id=8>