

Blended Language Learning: An Effective Solution but not Without Its Challenges

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Abstract: The study discussed in this investigation is part of a larger collaborative initiative between Laureate Education and Cambridge University Press (LEP-CUP collaboration). This second phase of the research, completed in 2013, aimed to further explore the conclusions from phase 1 and set out to identify *effective* and *appropriate* best practice blended learning models within the network. A study was set up with 36 teachers, all experienced ELT teachers with differing levels of experience in blended language teaching, who took part in extended focus groups discussions sessions prompted by a series of questions. Responses from these groups of teachers indicated that a flipped classroom model is beginning to develop. The authors of this study found evidence of changing approaches to language teaching, changes that are not without their challenges, but for a number of the teachers who participated in this research sample these changes are bringing considerable benefit to their teaching experience. This study offered teachers another opportunity to become change managers for students who need to acquire the autonomous, life-long learning skills of the 21st as they transition into professional life. The scope of this study cannot address and solve all of the issues involved in this process, but it provides a step towards that end.

Keywords: Blended teaching, blended learning, EFL instruction, English learning, flipped classroom, student efficacy, student motivation, student involvement

Over the past two decades, research has been conducted on a shift in higher education (HE) course content delivery, instruction, and teacher-learner interaction that occurs neither wholly face-to-face (F2F), nor entirely online, but rather within “the carefully designed synthesis of online and face-to-face learning incorporating a range of media based upon a sound

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constructivist pedagogical framework” (Buckley, Pitt, Norton, & Owens, 2010, p. 57). The synthesis, known as *blended learning*, can take on different blended forms—from mostly F2F, to mostly online, to a perfect 50-50 split. All definitions of blended learning, or teaching, implicitly recognize, however, that learner self-direction, active involvement, and motivation are critical (Johnson, 2014).

The shift towards student-centered learning and the increased adoption of online components as part of once traditional HE instruction formats has led researchers to the conviction that “in order to address some of the limitations associated with the exclusive use of e-learning [or F2F learning for that matter], there is a need to adopt a more ‘blended’ approach to learning” (Ituma, 2011, p. 59). The worldwide Laureate English Program (LEP) attempts to provide opportunities for the adoption and implementation of this type of approach for universities in the network.

New technologies, supporting a blended EFL instructional format, bring added benefits as well as challenges to the dynamic of language learning. Advantages include the ability to expand EFL learning beyond the time bound walls of the classroom. Web 2.0 tools (blogs, wikis, discussion forums, voice and video tools, flash files, etc.) allow for extended practice as well as instruction, which an EFL teacher can guide, monitor, and assess (Whyte, 2011). In addition to affording new types of online assessment opportunities through web 2.0 applications, these tools also allow for unlimited individual, peer-to-peer, small group, and whole group activities, projects, and assignments (Johnson, 2014).

According to So and Bonk (2010), however, blended teaching and learning engenders a complex and challenging new model for many teachers, as well as their students. The challenges for blended EFL instruction remain daunting for teachers because accomplishment at learning requires their students to become at least somewhat proactive and autonomous (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 2009). Not only must university students break out of the mold of relative passivity that they may have acquired in K-12 formation, they must also overcome the nervousness often associated with second language (L2) acquisition (Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, 2010). In order to facilitate the transition from minimal student engagement to success, teachers need to move beyond their own acquired—and generally traditional—instructional styles and to address personal reluctance to explore new methodologies, tools, and approaches to EFL teaching, such as blended learning.

Centered on the thesis that satisfied, motivated, and engaged students will learn a language with greater success in blended formats, in this interview-based qualitative study the researchers looked to the instructors themselves for insights into what teachers can do to increase the level of student satisfaction, engagement, and learning in the blended Laureate English Program (LEP).

Blended content coverage for students in the LEP has now become the model for teaching and learning at most Laureate universities, and the institutions are putting into place appropriate online and classroom curricular resources for language input, practice, and development (or are gradually doing so). The experience at many of these universities so far indicates that teachers spend relatively little time on the Learning Management System (LMS) platform in direct communication and engagement with their students.

Some teachers still feel the need to cover all of the course material in class, rather than online, in order to control the entire learning process. This teacher perception creates serious limitations to the overall potential effectiveness of a blended solution for language learning and often simply extends the transmission or behaviorist approach onto the LMS (Johnson, 2014). Senior (2010) emphasized that, instead of trying to cover everything F2F, teachers should focus on more general pedagogical outcomes and use technology as a means of virtually extending the classroom and concentrating on the learners' interests, requirements, experiences, and goals.

This approach to teaching aligns with the social cognitive or social constructivist frameworks that encourage the creation and facilitation of learning environments in which instruction focuses on enhancing student self-regulation and motivation through proactive engagement with students throughout the course content (Astin, 1999; Baker, 2010; Kuh 2009; Ladkin, Case, Gayá Wicks, & Kinsella, 2009; Zimmerman, 2008). In effect, this approach seeks to shift the students' locus of control from external (teacher-centered) to internal (learner-centered) in order to enhance student self-efficacy and to reduce their anxiety or sense of helplessness in the face of EFL learning (Bandura, 1977). Student proficiency remains the goal—not covering every page of the course book in class. A blended instructional format adds value to EFL learning if students engage proactively with course content through the online platform allowing teachers to maximize F2F class time through communicative activities, facilitated by the course instructor, that foster spoken language production (Richards, 2010; Senior, 2010).

Maximum Effective Use of Classroom Time: The Flipped Classroom Model

By opening up possibilities for more student-teacher and student-student interaction outside of the classroom, new kinds of activities and communication become possible in F2F sessions (Senior, 2010). The goal of successfully integrating technology in the EFL courses at LIUs, through an online platform, as a means to increase the students' learning outcomes and overall satisfaction constitutes the most important long-term implication of the current study.

Research into blended learning is of critical importance in order to develop and further understand the impact and benefits of blended learning. The study discussed in this investigation is part of a larger collaborative initiative between Laureate Education and Cambridge University Press (LEP-CUP collaboration)¹. This second phase of the research, completed in 2013, aimed to explore further the conclusions from phase 1 and set out to identify *effective* and *appropriate* best practice blended learning models within the network. A study was set up with 36 teachers, all experienced ELT teachers with differing levels of experience in blended language teaching, who took part in extended focus groups discussions sessions prompted by a series of questions (see Appendix A – Interview protocol). These instructors teach in institutions in the following countries, Honduras, Spain, Peru, Chile, and Thailand, and represent a range of academic and regional cultures.

Responses from these groups of teachers indicated that a flipped classroom model is beginning to develop. A flipped classroom is one in which a good deal of instruction takes place online so that F2F class time can be used for productive and language reinforcement activities—all with the guidance and help of the teacher (see, e.g., Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

¹ For details of the first phase of this research, see Johnson and Marsh (2013).

The authors of this study found evidence of changing approaches to language teaching, changes that are not without their challenges, but for a number of the teachers who participated in this research sample these changes are bringing considerable benefit to their teaching experience. These teachers are confident that technology is not there to replace them, but to support them in their teaching. With an open attitude towards technology, experimentation and innovation open new vistas on possibilities for information and communication technologies (ICT) incorporation in a BL environment. However, other focus group participants continued to struggle to achieve the flipped classroom dynamic with their students. Student autonomy was thought to be the major contributing factor to successful blended learning. From the teacher's perspective, many students have not yet reached the required level of maturity. When students do commit to an active, participative role in a blended learning EFL course dynamic, positive changes do indeed occur in the F2F context.

Focus on Communication in the Classroom

Teachers need to accept that blended instruction works. In a study conducted by Shibley, Amaral, Shank, and Shibley (2011), the results showed that BL proves more effective than F2F instruction alone. These authors stated that the appropriate alignment and purposeful integration of ICT and teaching strategies in a blended course can enhance both F2F and online student learning because it offers students "more structured learning opportunities outside of class than they have had previously [and this] increased time-on-task seems to improve learning" (p. 84).

Focus group feedback from this study indicated that when students take on a more autonomous role and complete pre- and post-classwork assignments then the F2F class can be used for more communicative activities. Teachers can thereby put in-class time to better, more productive use and become increasingly student centred in their approach. For these teachers, BL creates more enjoyable F2F classes or, as one teacher stated, "no more boring grammar explanations," and denotes a positive improvement for teachers and students alike. In a BL environment, classes tend to be more interactive than traditional teaching environment and, in one case, even bookless classes are possible. From the perspective of many teachers in this study, student participation in F2F classes has increased significantly in the BL format:

The class becomes more interactive [...] and participative. (Teacher H, personal communication)

When you're in a classroom with thirty students with books and nothing else [...] it's really quite hard to have the student led classroom. I've had to not take the lead. The students definitely take the lead now in the classroom. And it's exactly what we always say we should be doing. But the using blended learning has really made it easier and -possible to do that hundred percent. (Teacher P, personal communication)

Focus on Preparation, Practice, and Consolidation Online

For successful English language learning, the ability to extend the amount of time—through an Internet-based learning platform—for study, practice, and play with blended course content through guided practice outside of the classroom remains vitally important. An LMS can afford students an almost unlimited and highly convenient opportunity to engage with authentic linguistic input at a variety of levels and on multiple topics. The web 2.0 tools available within the

LMS (blogs, wikis, forums, voice tools, and video interfaces, etc.) allow for collaborative and cooperative learning activities. But, simply putting EFL content for students to access *out-there* on the platform suggests an insufficient blended course design. Online content must become an integral part of the overall course in order to more readily achieve the learning aims of instruction. Teachers need to play a leading role in this integration and change their instructional methods in ways that promote student engagement (Johnson, 2014). According to Whyte (2011), providing ICT resources to students becomes a relatively simple matter, but encouraging effective use of such materials requires “imagination and effort . . . [so that these resources] become an integral—normal—part of foreign language instruction in universities” (p. 218). The inappropriate or insufficient use of an LMS, on the part of the teachers or their students, must surely require a solution.

Often, teachers new to blended instructional formats feel that they are teaching or doing the same thing twice and, therefore, fail to engage fully with students in the online portion of a blended course (Nakazawa, 2009). The issues of time and resource management require consideration through the appropriate design and implementation of blended learning—and when teachers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. In this study, the researchers addressed the types and extent of engagement by teachers with their students through the online components of the LEP blended courses.

According to So and Bonk (2010), the design and implementation of blended learning environments require a clear integration between the two components of the course (F2F and online) in order to assure effective content delivery and knowledge transfer, and to fully support meaningful collaboration within and among members of the class group. This purposefully designed coordination fosters a sense of continuity and integration of the learning experience across and throughout the blended components of the course in a more holistic fashion. So and Bonk stressed that blended course designers should keep in mind and understand that the online platform does not replace the need for F2F teaching and learning but affords an opportunity to extend that interaction beyond the classroom in meaningful ways (2010). These authors stated, however, that some types of learning activities, tasks, or experiences stand better suited to online interactions than F2F. Instructors need not replicate or “teach the same thing twice” and must seek to design meaningful interaction in both spheres of a blended course so that “critical discourse episodes in face-to-face discussions are not lost and continue to develop online” (2010, p. 190). Teachers, as well as LEP leadership and other university stakeholders, need to design and create the necessary conditions for the implementation of truly blended EFL courses throughout the Laureate Network (Johnson, 2014).

Through analysis of the transcript data collected for this study, the authors found that the participants had carefully considered which activity types should be left to the LMS and handed off to the students as pre–or post–F2F class work. These teachers noted that the LMS is better at some types of learning tasks (e.g., reading, writing, drilling exercises) and that there was really no need to conduct these activities in class or to teach the same thing again. The general tenor of the focus groups indicated that the LMS was very well suited for preparation and consolidation work so that F2F classes could be used for productive activities and communicative practice. Motivating and actually encouraging students to consistently undertake this type of online work in autonomous fashion was also seen as a major challenge.

Teaching in the Blended Context

According to Lewis (2009), “technology is nothing without a teacher and a plan” (p. 9). In a BL context, teachers working with students—and students spending a great deal of time on L2 acquisition—remains the basic dynamic. An LMS and other online components can strengthen the teacher-learner-content relationship, but will not do so automatically, and cannot turn into a replacement for the teacher (Doughty, Meaghan, & Barrett, 2009; Fang, 2010). As Garrett (2009) stated, “it will always be better for students to learn language in courses led by well-trained language teachers than to attempt to do so independently, no matter how good the materials” (p. 726). A strong sense of teacher presence and the need to establish strong rapport with and among students in the online portion of BL courses is necessary in order to reduce anxiety and promote more effective L2 acquisition (Salcedo, 2010; Senior, 2010). Language learning is a social, as well as an academic, skill learned by way of personal interactions where the L2 becomes the primary means of communication (Johnson, 2014).

For the most part, teacher participants in this study only assigned the online automated marked activities to their students on the LMS, and little attention had been paid to the web 2.0 tools available through the platform. The teachers recognized that incorporating these tools into the learning process would benefit the students and would allow instructors to interact in more meaningful ways with them (Johnson, 2014).

The teachers openly admitted that their own participation and engagement with students online had been minimal—for the most part not going beyond that of checking the students’ progress in the automated exercises of the LMS. Teachers realized that the time spent with students in the F2F portion of the blended course holds vital importance for the production and practice of the language. Unfortunately, some teachers still currently use up much of this F2F time in covering the basics of grammar and vocabulary instruction (content delivery), repetitive activities (drilling), and a limited amount of group work activities (time permitting).

Blended Learning Changes Teaching Paradigm

There are multiple roles in blended or online teaching (Yuksel, 2009), and the inadequate clarification of these roles in blended courses confuses both teachers and students (Ocak, 2011). Even though students must conscientiously self-regulate their own learning, instructor monitoring of online work proves essential to the effective and seamless delivery of educational resources in support of F2F teaching and the enhancement of online participation by learners (Knight, 2010; Kupczynski, Stallone Brown, & Davis, 2008). The external guidance on the part of instructors who actively engage with their students in the online portion of a course shows particular importance if students are to succeed (Artino, 2008). The way that instructors choose to conduct this guidance can take many forms (tutoring, coaching, managing, facilitating). In each case, the teachers’ own particular role will often be a reflection of their F2F demeanor, interaction, and connectivity with students as well as their particular technical and technological skills and competencies (Senior, 2010; Vlachopoulos & Cowan, 2010; Yuksel, 2009). The findings of this study show this tendency to hold true for LEP teachers as well.

According to Vlachopoulos and Cowan (2010), all of the above mentioned approaches and roles can be more-or-less effective in e-moderation (i.e. the process of managing the communication of others online, Coghlan, 2001), depending upon various factors of a given course. Although no established best practice for online instructor interaction has come to the

fore, one cannot overstress the importance of teacher engagement in timely communication with their students in the different venues of a blended course. Again, enhanced teaching presence both on- and off-line proves crucial to support student engagement with blended course content (Artino, 2008; Senior, 2010). The concept of teacher presence becomes vital and may increase course attendance and boost learning, especially for reluctant learners (Hsu & Sheu, 2008). Low student attendance in the F2F component of the blended EFL courses at some LIUs concerns teachers and administrators alike (Johnson, 2014).

Teaching Experience Improved

For some of the more *mature-adopters* of the LEP, teaching has become more rewarding with BL. Teachers can focus *on the fun parts* when students are autonomous and confident enough to engage in relevant self-study through the LMS. Effective teachers reduce student anxiety through the development of a community of learners and through personalized, learner-focused teaching in both online and F2F settings (Richards, 2010). Cooperative learning among students results from a teaching strategy that requires helping one another to create an atmosphere of mutual achievement, collaboration, support, encouragement, and praise in order to increase proficiency and reduce anxiety in an EFL course (Awan et al., 2010; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2010). Blended learning offers instructors an opportunity to deal with the changing roles of teachers in the 21st century and requires a reconceptualization of the “valuable part they play in supporting the learning opportunities of their students in our progressively interconnected world” (Senior 2010, p. 146).

Changing Role Requires (more) Training

For this study, the researchers had assumed that appropriately-trained teachers, who believe they are competent and effective educational providers, are likely to demonstrate confidence in their instructional practices in most settings. Külekçi (2011) stated that “teacher efficacy beliefs [fostered in teacher-training programs] are regarded as an important criterion in increasing . . . productivity and motivation during the teaching and learning process” (p. 247). Many preservice or inservice teacher training programs, however, often fail to prepare their teachers to integrate technology into their teaching, which leaves them unprepared for the challenges of computer-based or blended instruction (Sayadian, Mukundan, & Baki, 2009). Furthermore, many teacher training programs generally focus on preparing teachers for service at the primary and secondary levels of education and do not pertain to instruction in HE, where faculty often have little or no training regarding teaching and the facilitation of learning (Johnson, 2014). Throughout the LIU network, many EFL instructors do not receive preparation in the use and incorporation of ICT in their teaching practice as part of their initial, preservice, formal training. A key issue for the focus group participants in this study was the perceived gap in their training. For example:

I would also say from the perspective of [...] just the teaching and starting to use blended learning one of the challenges has definitely been that because not many of us has actually been educated as teachers [...] using blended learning uh when we went to university so it's been quite a handful to adapt to it. (Teacher L, personal communication)

Reflection on this lack of preparation, as part of ongoing teacher training programs can begin to address the question of what constitutes adequate training for inservice LEP teachers in order to “function in the sociocultural context in which they will work” (Peacock, 2009, p. 261).

Recommendations for professional teacher training and further studies are proposed at the end of this paper. In any case, as Lewis (2009) has indicated, technology training should be regular, consistent, “given in small doses . . . (kept) to under an hour (and held) frequently” (p. 22).

Learning in the Blended Context

An LMS allows teachers to monitor and track the student learning process and to intertwine the social and academic domains (Dang & Robertson, 2010). Using the data-mining information gathered from an LMS and, depending on the results, adjusting motivational and teaching practices to accommodate low or insufficient usage can allow teachers to help reduce their students’ anxiety (Nakazawa, 2009) and to become more efficient learners (Hershkovitz & Nachmias, 2009). Of course, students can always attempt to cheat the system—a practice referred to in several of the focus groups—and blended programs require mechanisms that minimize fraudulent behavior (Joseph, Watanabe, Shiung, Choi, & Robbins, 2009). However, teachers have no reason to suspect that student deception will be commonplace, especially if attractive and motivating online content exists—and the teachers know the students in their class rooms and can recognize the style of their submitted work online (Johnson, 2014).

Blended Learning Increases Student Efficacy for Learning

Foreign language learning anxiety constitutes a major affective barrier to successful L2 acquisition. Awan et al. (2010) stated that this common anxiety “is not something to be ignored or considered a problem for students to deal with on their own” (p. 56). The formation of a Community of Practice among teachers comprises an important step for evaluating and improving teaching practice in dealing with this issue. Inviting students to take an active part in the learning community also becomes essential. Blended learning platforms (through web 2.0 tools, for example) can give teachers and students an opportunity for simulated real-life practice in oral and writing skills in a less anxiety-ridden setting thus allowing for more confident L2 output (Cheng, Hwang, Wu, Shadiev, & Xie, 2010; Salcedo, 2010). One of the major ideas of the international LEP—for the development of the online platform, as a component of an overall blended learning program—was to provide anxiety-free venues for students to practice in without fear of making mistakes or suffering ridicule (Johnson, 2014).

A review of relevant literature, and input from focus group participants in this study, demonstrates that the challenges associated with blended EFL programs are widely experienced. Many students from non-English speaking countries face issues of reticence, resistance, and anxiety when confronted with the urgent necessity to acquire some minimal level of English language proficiency. The introduction of online, blended, or other forms of hybrid EFL course content delivery has not suddenly, overnight, resolved these matters. However, the literature demonstrates that the ability to extend student access to course content and increase opportunities for meaningful student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction in productive EFL activities outside of the traditional four walls of the classroom through a blended learning program offers a potentially groundbreaking advance in the area of EFL instruction (Johnson, 2014).

Motivation and Student Involvement

Motivational factors play a pivotal role in the amount of individual student participation in an LMS and can indicate the type of learners they are. Astin (1999) and Kuh (2009) have been

quite emphatic on this point. Astin's theory of student involvement encouraged teachers to focus their attention on how motivated students seemed and how much time and energy they devoted to learning rather than what they accomplished (1999). Student involvement becomes the focus of concern, rather than any particular set of resources, specific course content, or preferred pedagogical techniques. Getting students to engage proactively in the learning dynamic can increase both their learning outcomes and their satisfaction. Careful consideration of the quality of student effort, the time and energy students invest in relevant learning tasks, and their purposeful interaction among peers and teachers throughout a blended course, constitute important components in the worldwide LEP in need of attention (Johnson, 2014). Kuh (2009) stated that "today *engagement* is the term usually used to represent constructs such as quality of effort and involvement in productive learning activities" (p. 6). In the present study, as previously noted, the researchers found that some LEP instructors have discovered ways to enhance student-teacher engagement with blended EFL course content, and with one another.

Research has demonstrated that active participation and cooperative learning in the EFL classroom effectively lowers student anxiety and increases proficiency. However, raising student participation largely depends on the skills, capabilities, imagination, and efforts of the instructor in order to increase the success and effectiveness of an online delivery platform (Koenig, 2010; Whyte, 2011). Teachers must believe that more active student engagement remains possible and that they are capable and proficient change-agents who can make a difference in student motivation (Johnson, 2014).

Confidence, Autonomy, and Class Participation

Establishing instructor presence throughout all contexts of the blended EFL courses of the LEP takes on the highest priority in order to expect greater learning success with both the younger and older student populations at Laureate institutions. In the classroom, more interactive activities (a) among students, (b) with the teacher, and (c) through technology-based components as a group accomplish this requirement (Johnson, 2014). Online, teachers need to help build student confidence by accompanying them through tasks that are *just within reach* in terms of complexity in order for them to build their sense of self efficacy and gradually become more autonomous in their learning (Joseph et al., 2009; Wlodkowski, 2008). The LEP offers this possibility to teachers who choose to take advantage of it.

Many of the teacher interviewees in this study felt that their students lacked the autonomous motivation required to engage in meaningful practice and study online. They also indicated that time management turned into a critical factor. The teachers remarked that students had sufficient time (even though the responses mentioned student responsibilities to family, work, and dedication to other, academic major-related subjects) but did not take, or schedule, the time necessary to engage with EFL course content outside of the classroom. The teachers saw poor time management as a cultural issue resulting, for the most part, from:

- a lack of learner autonomy,
- negative experiences with EFL learning before coming to the university,
- an unclear sense of the importance of EFL for professional development,
- a student perception that online study and practice was simply make-work and not an integral part of the learning process, and
- impatience with slow-to-load applications through the LMS (see also Johnson, 2014).

Other teachers, however, felt that their students were becoming more autonomous through BL and indicated that the newfound, independent learning afforded through the LEP gave students a sense of confidence in F2F sessions and independence outside of the classroom, in real-life situations.

Learner autonomy remains a multifaceted capacity recognized and addressed in the particular social context of EFL courses at the university level (Dang & Robertson, 2010). Learner autonomy has much to do with an individual student's innate, personal, cognitive, and learning styles for tackling the challenges of EFL (Srichanyachon, 2011). But, blended instruction can potentially help teachers facilitate learning for all students. On one hand, an LMS allows students to initiate their own learning processes without exclusive overreliance on the teacher (Dang & Robertson, 2010). On the other hand, language learning denotes a social phenomenon that requires some basic level of human-to-human interaction. According to Nakazawa (2009), "some [EFL] skills can be acquired through self-study ... while other skills need to be learned through the experience of interacting with other people along with the guidance of a teacher" (p. 406). Primary among these, stand the productive skills of speaking and writing in which human assessment, accuracy, and feedback remain unmatched by online programs (Fang, 2010; Shih, 2010). Web 2.0 does offer voice tools and writing platforms, such as wikis and blogs requiring a high degree of human interaction and may offer a partial solution to this challenge (Wichadee, 2010). However, an overreliance on technology for L2 acquisition could lead to student boredom or a strong sense of isolation and a felt lack of essential academic support (Genc Ilter, 2009). A truly blended EFL program at participating LIUs could help to resolve some of the multifaceted challenges of English language learning (Johnson, 2014). Thoughtful BL course design will prove essential to achieving a more student-meaningful and teacher-supported blend that all participants can embrace.

Leading Change and Life-long Learning Skills

Even though respondents stated that some of their students take LEP classes just to get a minimum passing grade, BL can help others to continue learning when the teacher is unavailable. Time remains the most important factor of all in language learning. Currently, according to some of the teacher participants in this study, many LEP students do very little work online outside of the classroom and attend classes irregularly. This situation creates a pressing concern for all involved and requires imaginative ways to tackle it. Giving students (not teachers) the opportunity to spend more time on EFL instruction remains the goal of the LEP. Inviting teachers to air and discuss their multiple perspectives on F2F and online experiences in blended LEP courses throughout the network can lead to new ideas and potential best practices, improving both the learning experiences and outcomes of these courses. This study offered teachers another opportunity to become change managers for students who need to acquire the autonomous, life-long learning skills of the 21st century (as well as sufficient EFL proficiency) as they transition into professional life. The scope of this study cannot address and solve all of the issues involved in this process, but it provides a step towards that end. The study did offer LEP teachers, as a community of educators at their respective institutions, a chance to discuss solutions in reiterative fashion. Typically, according to Kotter, leading and managing change becomes "a long term process" (as cited in Quinn et al., 2012). Quinn et al. (2012) further stated that, "[u]nlike industry, however, we have opportunities in higher education to restart the process of change with each new student cohort entering into the . . . learning environment" (p. 26). This study provided an occasion to rethink and reinvigorate the vision for (and culture of) blended EFL instruction at selected LIUs (see also Johnson, 2014).

Creating the conditions for a high level of student motivation and satisfaction can act as a counterweight to the challenges of a blended approach and can prove crucial to the process of successful learning (Woltering, Herrler, Spitzer, & Spreckelsen, 2009; Wu, Tennyson, & Hsia, 2010). Bolstered by overall student motivation and satisfaction, a sustained, continuous, and persistent engagement by students over time no matter the modality can become an attainable goal (Kocoglu, Ozek, & Kesli, 2011).

Recommendations for Further Studies

The time and effort that university students spend gaining skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) have critical impact on their success in learning the language (Whyte, 2011). In general, students who engage more with the task of learning EFL attain higher levels of language competence. The LEP-CUP collaboration is beginning to bear fruit in the goal towards stronger learner engagement in some of the more *mature-adopter* institutions. Over the last five years, and during the course of this study, the researchers have learned a great deal about blended learning. The problems and issues identified through interviews with teachers in some of the local settings and surrounding blended instruction have been echoed in the findings and conclusions of other international researchers. Investigation into the delivery and assessment of course content through blended formats has become an important and emergent field of study. Many universities are looking for ways to expand their enrollment and to control costs while, at the same time, maintaining or increasing academic quality. Blended programs present an attractive and viable solution to this challenge, when thoughtfully implemented, and decision makers are searching for evidence and experience-based proposals to that effect (Johnson, 2014).

In this inquiry, the researchers have discovered some emerging best practices for blended instruction at several participating institutions. Other universities continue on a steep learning curve to discover ways that BL can add value to the teaching and learning dynamic. The LEP-CUP research collaboration will continue to accrue and analyze more data in further studies. For now, these findings may serve as an aid to decision making by LIU-LEP leadership on possible future directions for their local EFL programs. Allocating budget for continuous teacher training and professional development programs on the topic of BL is recommended. Defining and specifying the vision for language learning as part of a university-wide policy statement at LIU schools would also help to clarify roles and expectations of LEP teachers and students alike.

Regarding directions for future research in light of the findings of this study, it is recommended that follow-up studies, both qualitative and quantitative, should concentrate on:

- the students' understanding and perceptions of the blended EFL teaching and learning environment in order to address issues that create resistance and negatively impact their engagement,
- the dynamics of blended learning rather than blended teaching in order to address student needs, and
- longitudinal-comparative research on student EFL learning outcomes across the network between and among the various regional institutions.

In addition, the LEP leadership at participating institutions might consider challenging individual faculty members to explore inquiry in their own classrooms—using basic research

designs (e.g., pre-post, single subject)—and the international LEP should consider crafting a student survey or other instruments to guide and direct further development of blended learning (Johnson, 2014).

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Appendix A—Consent form

You are invited to take part in a Focus Group-based research study into the impact of the introduction of blended learning on the role of the teacher, the student and the classroom. You were chosen for the focus group interview, and asked to volunteer, because of your expertise in the area of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and your experience with the Blended Learning—LMS-based—courses currently being run at Laureate International Universities (LIU) network institutions. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the focus-group interview session.

This focus-group, interview-based research study is being conducted by two researchers:

- Christopher P. Johnson, who is a doctoral student at Walden University and also the Latin American regional manager for the Laureate English Programs, part of the Laureate Network Products and Services (LNPS) branch of Laureate Education, Inc.
- Debra Marsh, who is the Associate Director of Pedagogy, Research and Training for ELT Online Solutions at Cambridge University Press.

Background Information:

The purpose of this focus-group, interview-based study is to gather primary qualitative data from TEFL professionals and to learn about the participant’s experiences with the effectiveness of LMS-based blended EFL courses at LIU institutions as well as to solicit insights into possible best practices for teacher engagement with students (in the classroom and through the LMS) as a way to increase learner involvement, retention, satisfaction, and assessed outcomes.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a web-based, audio-recorded focus group session/interview, lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Here are some sample questions:

On Blended Language Learning

What types of activities are (might be) best suited for online instruction/learning? Why?

On the role of the teacher

To what extent has blended learning changed the way you approach teaching?

On the role of the learner

How have your students adapted to the change in content delivery format?

On the changing nature of the ‘classroom’

To what extent is the teaching experience in the ‘blended’ classroom different to the ‘traditional’ teaching experience in class?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this focus-group study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to participate in the study. No one at your university or from Laureate Language Services will treat you differently if you decide not to take part in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later (during or after the

study). If you feel stressed during the focus group session, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life. There is the minimal risk of psychological stress or fatigue during the focus group session. If you feel stressed during the session, you may stop at any time. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

There are no particular benefits to you from participating in this focus-group study. Possible benefits to society include the insights of professional TEFL practitioners like yourself that may contribute to a better understanding of the current blended TEFL programs delivered at Laureate universities and to provide potential best-practices into the future (at your university specifically, and throughout the LEP in general) as a way through which TEFL educational services, provided to LIU students, can be improved.

Payment/Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this focus group study.

Privacy/Confidentiality:

- The data will be stored and analysed in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998.
- Your personal information will be used to validate and process the data you provide. We will not share your name or contact information with any other party.
- All citations (spoken and written) from the data which are used in published works or presentations shall be anonymized to such an extent that all references to people, places and institutions are unidentifiable.

Contacts and Questions:

The researchers' names are Christopher P. Johnson and Debra Marsh. You may ask them any questions you might have at any time. You may contact the researchers via email at: christopher.johnson@laureate.net and dmarsh@cambridge.org.

The researchers will provide you with a copy of this form to keep.

Declaration: I grant to Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Cambridge the right, licence and permission to record my speech and/or writing and assign to them full copyright in any resultant recordings, transcriptions and written texts.

I understand that the recordings may be transcribed and entered into computerized corpora of English texts, and I agree to these recordings and transcriptions being used for research and teaching purposes by English language specialists, in academic publications and presentations and for the production of study, teaching and testing materials.

I further understand that the said recordings and transcriptions or extracts there from may be used or licensed by Cambridge University Press for further research and development purposes and used in publications in recorded, re-recorded or written form, and I give my consent to this use.

I further declare that:

- I am 18 years of age or older;
- All information I provide will be full and correct; and
- I give this consent freely.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Written or Electronic* Signature

Researcher's Written or Electronic* Signature

Researcher's Written or Electronic* Signature

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

Appendix B – Interview protocol

Interview Protocol for LEP Research, Phase 2 (CJohnson/DMarsh):

Introductory remarks:

Good (morning, afternoon, evening). We want to thank you all again for taking the time to do this focus group interview with us today. As we mentioned before, we'd like to talk with you about:

- a) your experiences as an TEFL practitioner and your role within the LEP blended courses at your university.
- b) your perceptions of the role of students in blended and online settings and,
- c) your opinions about the changing nature of the 'classroom' (face to face and virtual) in blended learning environments.

We would like to ask you a few questions related to these topics. The interview should take less than an hour.

We are soliciting the perspectives of TESOL professionals as part of an ongoing research project about blended EFL teaching and learning in an **effort to identify best practices that can be put forward in the Laureate network**. Your input is invaluable and will be

used as part of the primary data from which conclusions and recommendations can be made.

The information you provide during this interview will be used for this purpose only and will remain strictly confidential. This means that your input will only be shared with the members of research team and that anything used in the final summary report will not identify you specifically as respondents.

We would like this to be a conversation and therefore not have to interrupt the flow of our discussion by taking detailed notes while we talk. In order to do this, we will be audiotaping the interview, with your permission, so that we do not miss anything that you say and can accurately document the insights you convey. Please speak as clearly as possible. We do not want to misunderstand any of your valuable comments during later analysis of the transcript.

Please know that there are no particular right-or-wrong answers to any of these questions. We are simply looking for your sincere views and opinions on the issues involved. If you feel that you are unsure of, uncomfortable with, or merely unable to respond to a particular question, please just tell us so and we will move on. You may also ask to end the focus group interview at any time.

In your responses to any of the questions, please feel free to elaborate or illustrate in any way you like. Your personal examples will be very helpful.

Some of the questions may be interpreted in different ways. If we ask a follow up question to something you have said, we are only trying to clarify the original question or seeking to fully understand your response. Please feel free to ask us to clarify any question or comment that you may not understand as well.

Do you have any questions before we start about what I have just said?

At this time, then, we remind you of your signed consent to participate in this study. All of us have signed and dated copies of the consent form which certifies we agree to proceed with this interview. You will receive one of the copies of this document and the other will be kept, by me, in a secure location, separate from the transcript of your responses.

With your permission then, let us begin the interview.

Questions

Blended Language Learning

1. Which online activities did you usually ask students to complete before class?
Why?
2. Which activities did you usually use in the classroom? Why?
3. Which online activities did you usually ask students to complete after class?
Why?

The role of the teacher

1. What do you consider to be the major benefits to **language teaching** in blended EFL courses?
2. What do you consider to be the major challenges to **language teaching** in blended EFL courses?
3. To what extent has a blended instructional format changed the way you approach teaching?

The role of the learner

1. What do you consider to be the major benefits to **language learning** in blended EFL courses?
2. What do you consider to be the major challenges to **language learning** in blended EFL courses?
3. How have your students adapted to the change in content delivery format?

The changing nature of the 'classroom'

1. To what extent is the teaching experience in the 'blended' classroom different from the 'traditional' teaching experience in class?
2. What did you like about the changes in the classroom teaching experience?
3. What did you NOT like about the changes in the classroom teaching experience?

Before we conclude this interview, are there any final comments you would like to add or questions you would like to ask us?

***** If any participant wishes to discontinue the interview, ask if s/he would be willing to share why.**

Thank the participants for their participation