



INCORPORATING A BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH INTO THE INTENSIVE ENGLISH COURSE

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Abstract

The encompassing goal of the Intensive English Course at Universitas Billfath is to help students improve their English skills so that they can pass the standardized English test. In practice, however, this expected goal could not be effectively achieved because of the truancy issue and pandemic situation. In this scheme, blended learning is a thoughtful enhancement of the learning experience with the incorporation of online technology which can offer the flexibility of learning and social interaction to enhance learning. Moreover, as a kind of blended learning technology, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) can afford students with flexibility and opportunities to work collaboratively. Thus, this study is an attempt to propose the incorporation of a blended learning approach into the existing classroom sessions in the Intensive English Course at Universitas Billfath. Since the proposed blended learning is a novel learning experience in this context, there may be several issues that remain significant to take into account. Further, it is also important to assess the effectiveness of the use of VLE in this blended learning design, so it warrants an evaluation to embark on a constructive review of how this kind of blend can enhance English learning by developing its potential and improving its imperfections.

Keywords: Blended Learning Approach, Flexibility, Collaborative Learning, VLE, Intensive English Course

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INTRODUCTION

In the Intensive English Course at Universitas Billfath, the encompassing goal is to help freshmen improve their English skills so that they can pass the standardized English test. However, this expected goal could not be effectively achieved because of the truancy issue. Thanks to technology, blended learning can be a viable approach to improving this teaching and learning practice. By not reducing all contact hours, blended learning is a thoughtful enhancement of the learning experience with the incorporation of online technology which can offer the flexibility of learning and social interaction to enhance learning (Graham, 2006; Sharma, 2010; Hockly, 2018). Moreover, as a kind of blended learning technology, a VLE can afford students with flexibility and opportunities to work collaboratively (McLoughin and Lee, 2007; Barker and Gossman, 2013). Thus, proposing a blended learning approach through the VLE can allow the teacher to offer flexibility and promote collaboration among students in the Intensive English Course. This paper discusses the cogent rationales underlying this blended learning proposal by organizing in the following way: considering the decision-making of incorporating blended learning, describing the transformative blend, pointing out challenges, and drawing a conclusion.

Decision-making

Offering a blended learning design for the Intensive English Course is underpinned by several key considerations which are expected to be able to address the issue of students' truancy which may inhibit the learning effectiveness. These considerations comprise two decisive aspects: flexibility and collaboration.

Bringing flexibility to access learning

As indicated above, it requires the teacher to create a flexible approach to facilitating students to access learning due to the truancy issue. This is what Collis and Moonen (2001) refer to as 'flexible learning' which can benefit students with greater flexibility to enhance their learning. Flexibility is equated to "allowing the learner

some critical choices in the learning situation so that it better meets his or her needs and individual situation” (Collis, 1998, 376). One of the rationales underpinning the design of blended learning is the flexibility to access knowledge (Ostguthorpe and Graham (2003, as cited in Graham, 2006); Jonker et al, 2020). Thus, it is worth noting that incorporating blended learning in this course can be a viable strategy to offer ease for students to access their learning in a flexible way regarding their condition. Bonk et al. (2002) ascertain that the success of technology-mediated learning environments is affected by the ease of access to learning. In higher education, Collis (1998) points out that flexibility can bring about the convenience of learning dimensions which include flexibility in location, program, types of interaction, forms of communication, and study materials. More relevant to this context, the flexibility which is mainly offered is to improve the adaptability of location and time to consider students' physical and time constraints to access learning in the classroom (Collis and Moonen, 2001; Jonker et al., 2020). This can perpetuate the effectiveness of teaching and learning which could not take place in the classroom session. So, by situating students in blended learning mode, they can benefit from the distributed environment which offers increased access to learning. Instead of relying heavily on the materials presented in the classroom session where most students frequently miss the lesson and could not acquire the knowledge, students can access the lesson through the online platform to develop their English skills (Eydelman, 2013; Gilbert, 2013).

However, blended learning should not solely be devised to increase student's access to learning but also to rethink the teaching and learning process (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Collis and Moonen (2001) accentuate that flexible learning in higher education does not merely depend on the model of knowledge acquisition, but it should be more flexible to the acquisition and contribution-oriented model. They further suggest the learning activities should encourage students to engage both in acquiring and constructing their knowledge, for example participating in a discussion. This view is also shared by Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison (2013) who highlight that the design of blended learning should not only accentuate the access to learning but also should consider how blending can maintain the social interaction within the virtual learning environment. Blended learning should be able to retain the flexible learning experience with collaboration (Ross and Gage, 2006; Pombo et al., 2010). It is, therefore, incorporating a virtual learning environment in this context is not mainly aimed at bringing flexibility to access to learning but also perpetuating the balance between flexible learning and students' social interaction which can promote collaboration.

Promoting collaborative learning

Designing e-learning needs to consider the pedagogical perspective which affects how the design of blended learning will be devised in teaching and learning practice (Feng Su, 2019). In this blended learning plan, the pedagogical theory which is adhered to is the cognitive perspective which accentuates the theory of social constructivism in which knowledge construction is built through social interaction (Mayes and De Freitas, 2007). Vygotsky (1978) calls this learning approach ‘social constructivism’ which suggests that knowledge development is enhanced through social activity. He further underpins the social constructivism on the concept of the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)* which explains the difference between a learner’s current conceptual development and learner’s potential capability which is developed by others’ guidance or peer collaboration. In correspondence with this, Mayes and De Freitas (2004) posit that both peers and teachers are essential in students’ knowledge development. This social interaction can be implemented through the construction of a group discussion, developing a shared understanding of the task, and maintaining feedback on students’ performances. This is what Jones (2007) refers to as collaborative learning as social learning which accentuates how students process their learning in and through social activity.

Collaborative learning is a pedagogical approach that can be emerged in online learning (Weller, 2007; Pombo et al, 2010). In collaborative learning, students can work together towards a joint purpose in an online discussion or group online project. Ravenscroft and Cook (2007) assert that an online learning environment should afford meaningful interaction among students and with the lesson to the scaffold learning process because learning occurs through interaction otherwise learning in an online space is practically useless. Furthermore, instead of a ‘drill and practice’ approach, collaboration help students acquire better knowledge. As noted by Pombo et al (2010), performing a joint task can attain better learning outcomes compared to an individual task, because students engage in an interactive discussion with their peers. Mayes and De Freitas (2007) point out that computer-supported collaborative learning can be carried out to associate a social constructive approach with the online learning design. Besides the flexibility for students to access learning, therefore, the aim of blending this course is to allow students to learn collaboratively in the virtual learning environment (Alonso et al., 2005; Gilbert, 2013; Eydelman, 2013). In this case, the rationale underlying incorporating the collaborative learning approach in VLE is that the classroom session could not accommodate effective collaboration because of the attendance issue where only a few students attend the class. Given afforded by the flexibility of learning, it is, therefore, necessary to promote collaborative learning among students through VLE to enhance their English skills, such as by assigning them into a group to discuss problems with the subject-verb agreement so that they can discuss each other to construct knowledge about English grammatical accuracy.

A task-based approach to collaborative learning through the VLE

Promoting collaborative learning in a virtual learning environment is a novel method in this teaching context. It is, therefore, necessary, to carry out this approach with ample consideration of stages that can help teachers prepare an appropriate task (Ellis, 2003; Cohen and Lotan, 2014). This is what Ellis (2003) refers to as the notion of task-based teaching which has the general aim to facilitate language learning and skill improvement through collaborative knowledge construction. This approach will be useful to utilize since it will scaffold the collaborative activities of students in the VLE. Mayes and de Freitas (2004) acknowledge that scaffolding plays a big role in devising the constructive approach. In light of it, to attain the learning goals of collaborative learning in VLE, it is important to design a collaborative lesson based on the task-based methodology. Devising task-based collaborative learning in the VLE needs to select appropriate work schemes. Ellis (2003) highlights three principle chronologies, i.e., 'pre-task, during-task, and post-task (p.243). Marjanovic (1999) calls these stages preparation for collaborative learning, the electronic session, and evaluation of collaborative learning (p.132). Hence, it is important to devise online collaborative learning in VLE using the task-based approach so that it can scaffold how the students can process the learning.

Through the pre-stage, students can prepare their minds to learn collaboratively through the VLE. This task drives students' minds to be ready to involve in the VLE. Lee (2000, as cited in Ellis, 2003) acquaints that to make students prepared for the task, it is important to explain the task clearly to the students so that they are aware of their task organization and the learning objectives to achieve (Cohen and Lotan, 2014). Marjanovic (1999) acknowledges that the teacher takes a crucial part in the preparation phase to organize the task and provides information about the technology use. Hence, establishing clear learning objectives and guidelines on how the students will carry out the task can scaffold the students' task performance and help them achieve the learning goal. Furthermore, a pre-task session will be beneficial to aid students' adoption of the task using the VLE by guiding how to use VLE and perform a simple collaborative task. Cohen and Lotan (2014) warn that it is not necessary to assume that students know how to work in a group in a 'constructive collegial fashion' (p. 41), moreover in a new learning environment. So, Ellis (2003) suggests that the strategy of performing a similar pre-task can activate students' regulation on managing their main task. In the main phase, students will be performing online collaborative work to accomplish a joint task which is assigned by the teacher for each group. This online-situated phase will be much scaffolded by the initial stage because it is such a guide to process learning through the task (Marjanovic, 1999). He also highlights the importance of the teacher's presence during the task. In the final stage, Ellis (2003) suggests that teachers need to give feedback and invite them to evaluate their tasks. This evaluation can include critically reviewing their task performance. More essentially, giving feedback on the student's performance can affect their learning improvement and motivation. This is convinced by Hattie and Timperley (2007) that the student's learning and achievement are much influenced by the power of feedback. Hence, the post-stage of collaborative learning is also essential to carry out by the teacher to discuss what students have performed and improve their learning.

DISCUSSIONS

Transforming the blend through the VLE

Integrating the blend into the Intensive English Course is a novel learning experience for the students since the current teaching and learning practice is fully conducted in face-to-face learning. This face-to-face environment might not much help enhance students' learning since the learning practice was mostly inhabited by the attendance issue. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) suggest that higher education should be able to unearth the transformative potential that they have to enhance the learning experience. They further acknowledge that blended learning can be a thoughtful technology transformation in higher education. It is in agreement with Motteram and Sharma's article (2009) that to take advantage of digital technology in education, blended learning can be an appropriate approach to paving the way for effective teaching and learning. In other words, developing the transformative potential of higher education through a blended learning approach may help teachers facilitate flexible learning experiences to improve teaching and learning.

Incorporating a blended approach into learning can be aided by a wide range of technologies including Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). VLE is defined as synonymous with LMS as "a software system that combines some different tools that are used to systematically deliver content online and facilitate the learning experience around that content" (Weller, 2007, p. 5). Dalziel (2007) warns that the plain use of most VLE may only focus on content development which may miss the collaborative affordances for learning. However, Emelyanova and Voronina (2014) assert that this software cannot only be used as a system to manage the course content but also can be enhanced to encourage teachers to create active learning. In alignment with this, Lonn & Teasley (2009) also note that such web-based learning can be utilized to support the interactivity of learning.

Indeed, Yang et al. (2013) ascertain that a virtual learning environment can afford the students the opportunity to learn collaboratively. In this case, it means that the use of VLE can support the essence of blended learning which enables students to access English learning interactively and collaboratively. This is what McLoughin and Lee (2007) perceive as the affordances of social software which can enhance the potential transformative of learning in the digital environment.

A detailed plan of the blended learning design

Learning Context and Issues

The course that I taught is the Intensive English Course at Universitas Billfath, Indonesia. It is a pre-requisite course for first-year students. They are required to attend the course for a month and to take a standardized English test at the end of the course; otherwise, they will not be able to do their dissertations. This class starts between 8 and 11.15 am and is held from Monday to Friday. In practice, however, students find it difficult to arrive at the classroom on time. This is because the start time is in the morning students may do their part-time job in the morning or they may face a traffic jam especially when it is on Monday morning. Consequently, this condition causes a lot of types of attendance issues among students. Take, for example, students who frequently come 30-60 minutes late and even some of them skip the class which means that they will miss the lessons. Since the students frequently come late, they might not be able to engage with the lesson immediately which in turn they might acquire the lesson less. This also happened to the absent students they might not be able to catch up on the materials they missed.

This problem can affect the learning goals of the course in which students are expected to pass the standardized English test at the end of the course. As a result, only a few students could perform well on the test while the rest found it difficult to pass the test, and consequently, they have to retake the course next academic year. Furthermore, this attendance problem inhibited the teacher’s creativity to design more interactive learning such as collaborative learning in the classroom because only a few students came from the beginning of the lesson. Accordingly, the teaching and learning are mostly conducted in a form of drilling and individual practicing. In sum, this current teaching and learning practice could not reach the intended learning objectives in which students are expected to pass the standard score of the adapted Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is an intermediate level, as a requirement for carrying out the dissertation. It is, therefore, promoting the ideas of blended learning could be a viable strategy to address these aforesaid issues.

The expected learning outcomes

Regarding the issue in this context, this proposal of blended learning would like to achieve some expected learning outcomes as follows: (1) it is expected that students can be able to flexibly access learning anytime and anywhere, so they will not miss any lesson; (2) it is projected that students can work collaboratively with their peers, so they can improve their English skills; (3) more essentially, it is expected that students can be able to pass the standard score.

The proposed ‘blend’

Concerning the context and the expected learning outcomes, the proposed ‘blend’ that I would like to suggest is a blend that can offer flexibility to the students to involve in the learning process where most of them are constrained to fully engage in the classroom. Therefore, I intend to maneuver two of the classroom sessions of the course into the virtual learning environment (VLE) which is inseparable from the classroom session. The students will be situated in both online space and face-to-face sessions (*see figure 1*). This blended learning will focus narrowly on flexibility and collaborative learning.



Figure 1. The overview of the proposed blended learning

As stated in this context, the Intensive English Course is held five days Monday to Friday. Figure 1, depicts that the course is held online in VLE on Monday and Wednesday and in the classroom on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. This learning mode distribution is caused by the fact that on Monday students frequently come late and skip the class because of the morning traffic jam. Therefore, it is necessary to bring flexibility to the students on Monday by attending the online in VLE. Before involving in the VLE, the teacher assigns students into several groups of three or four and asks them to access the resources in the VLE as their preparation to work collaboratively with their groups. They are assigned by the teacher to complete a joint task online and submit it via VLE. This task can be varied from collaborative writing to creating a joint presentation. To maintain the student's performance in an online session, the teacher can monitor through the VLE statistic analytic and provide guidance or feedback through messaging. It is because the success of online learning relies mostly on communication, so the teacher needs to create a group of instant messaging which can be accessed synchronously and easily. Take, for example, the students may find difficulty or confusion in completing the task, they can ask directly to the teacher through WhatsApp instant messaging or through the VLE messaging feature. Further, they can also be able to communicate with their friends and give each other feedback through those messaging tools (*see figure 2*).

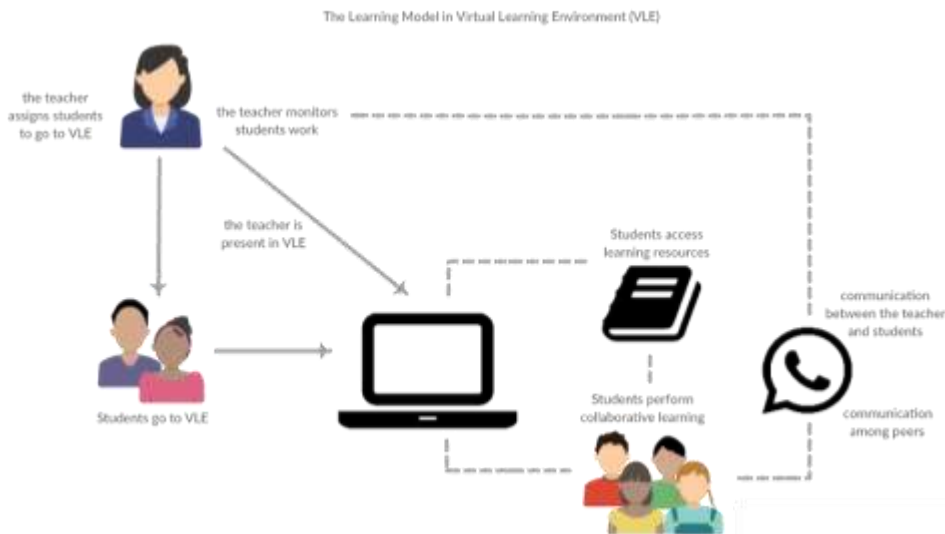


Figure 2. The learning model in VLE

In the following classroom session on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, the teacher distributes each group's work to other groups and encourages them to discuss the given work. After students discuss with their groups, the teacher will bring the discussion to the whole classroom regarding some unclear explanations which need to clarify. The teacher will also invite students to evaluate their performance and give them feedback. Afterward, to test the language skills that students have learned in both VLE and classroom sessions, the teacher asks the students to carry out an individual practice test that comprises the materials they have learned (*see figure 3*).

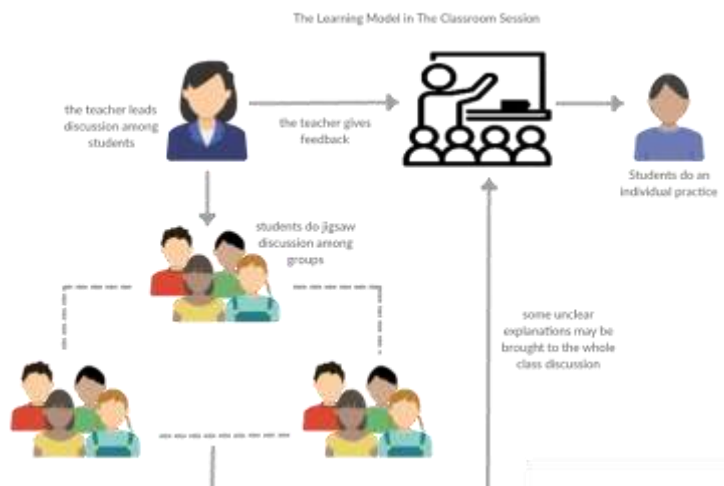


Figure 3. The learning model in the classroom session

Taken together, it can be concluded that the proposed blend for this course can appropriately be defined as the use of a virtual learning environment along with classroom sessions that offer flexibility and allow students to learn English collaboratively, thereby can enhance their learning.

Learning and pedagogical theories

The blended learning model used in this proposal is a transforming blend since this blended learning design promotes the new learning experience of students in a virtual learning environment with an improving pedagogical approach to teaching English. In specific, the learning theory to which this blended learning adheres is the social constructivism theory i.e. collaborative learning with a task-based learning approach to scaffold students learning process.

The blended technologies

The main technology utilized in this blended learning is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), a web-based system that affords teachers and students the to perform their teaching and learning activities on the online platform. In this case, I will use Google Classroom because it is a free, open-source, and hosted LMS in which the teachers will not have to concern themselves with the maintenance of the system but rather more focus on the content and the design of learning activities. It also has simple set-up features which will ease the teacher and students' adoption of the technology. More essentially, this VLE enables collaboration among students since it offers collaborative features such as Google docs and Google Slides. Furthermore, this VLE is accessible for both students and teachers since this software can be used either as a site or as a mobile phone app. Google Classroom offers integration with numerous applications that support learning, for example, Canva and Padlet. In terms of its sustainability, Google Classroom has already been used by around 100 million people over the world so this technology will sustain learning. Besides the core technology, WhatsApp, online instant messaging will also be occupied to maintain communication. The decision underlying the use of WhatsApp instant messaging is because this tool offers synchronous and fast communication which most students in this context have used to communicate in their daily life. This convenience of instant messaging is very important in online learning since it affords the students to get a direct response to feedback from their teachers or peers. Indeed, it is also important to be able to integrate VLE with other complementary technologies which can support the interface of the main technology. In this case, I propose Google tools since it comprises a wide range of convenient and integrated systems, such as Google Meet and miscellaneous tools which can support a collaborative learning approach.

An example of a blended activity

One of the examples of this blended learning is assigning students to perform collaborative task-based learning which adopts the three phases of performing a task, pre-, during- and post-task. In a case in illustration, students are assigned to create a multimedia presentation using Google Slides to discuss the common error in English grammatical structure, for example, subject-verb agreement. As illustrated in figure 4, the learning session situated in VLE is held on Monday. In pre-task, the teacher assigns students into a group of four or five (instructed in the first meeting in the classroom as the introduction to the blended learning approach). Then, they should go to Google Classroom and read the task guidelines and the learning objective that they will achieve. This guideline will be shown in the section folder 'Subject-Verb Agreement' in Google Classroom. Afterward, they are ready to work collaboratively with their group. To clarify everything unclear, students can contact the teacher via the WhatsApp group created by the teacher to receive a fast response synchronously. During during-task, students are asked to create google slides and share the link with the teacher, so that the teacher can track the students' performance. In these google slides, students in a group can write the presentation simultaneously and then finish it too late and submit it to the Google Classroom. After they submit it, the teacher will upload students' presentation slides into the section folder 'Subject-Verb Agreement' so that other groups can look at other groups' work. The teacher's presence in this collaborative process is very important to help students' collaborative performance.

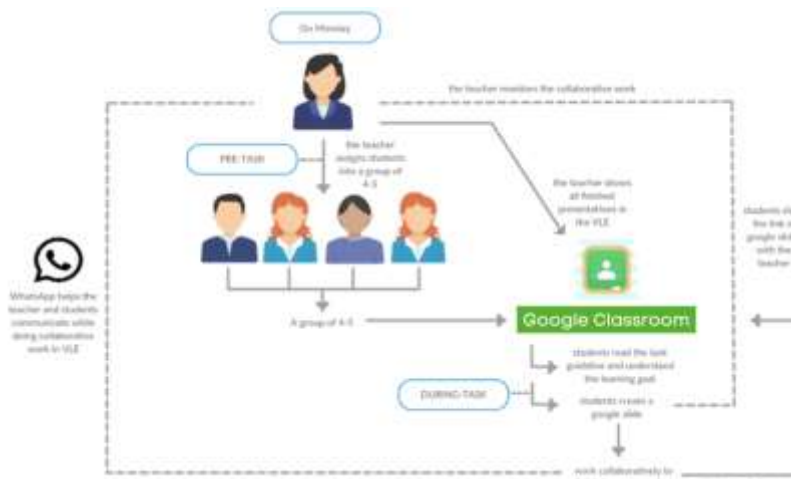


Figure 4. A blended activity in VLE on Monday

In figure 5, the following session or post-task is held in the classroom on Tuesday. The teacher asks students to gather with their groups and discuss other groups' presentations in the VLE, so students are asked to bring their laptops (approximately 5 laptops). In a group discussion, the teacher is going around them to help students construct a discussion and encourage them to leave a comment and create a question regarding the content. These comments and questions are then brought to be discussed with the whole class. In this session, other groups can answer and respond to it. The teacher will also give feedback on students' presentations and explain in more detail the unclear materials. In the end, to test students' understanding the individual practice is administered to the students in the class.

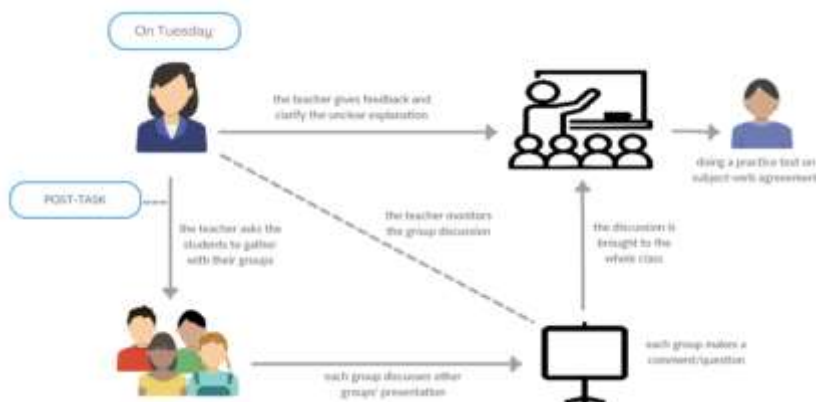


Figure 5. Classroom activity on Tuesday

Challenges of practical implementation

Since the proposed blended learning is a novel learning experience regarding the emergence of online learning technology, there may be several issues that occur in the teaching and learning practice. First and foremost, as also shared by Eydelman (2013), provoking students' motivation to engage throughout the collaborative work in the new learning platform is challenging. Therefore, it is important to note that the teacher plays a big role to make the VLE becomes an engaging online platform for students to visit. Dörnyei (2001) ascertains that motivation plays a crucial role to ensure the success of language learning. He (2002) suggests that teachers need to create motivational strategies which ensure students' motivation throughout the 'practical, actional and postnational stages' of blended learning (p.140). For example, the teacher can generate students' motivation to engage in learning by developing a personal relationship with students (Dörnyei, 2001). Furthermore, since this VLE is a new technological adoption for Intensive English courses, the teacher may not be familiar with the design of VLE for Intensive English courses. It is, hence, necessary to hold teacher training on the use of VLE and the design of collaborative learning in blended learning. Brush et al. (2003) stress the importance of the development of teachers' competence in technology to be able to improve learning through the emergence of technology in education. Through the training, teachers can develop their ICT skills to design quality collaborative learning using VLE.

CONCLUSION





In conclusion, blended learning can offer flexibility for students in this context to access their learning both in the classroom and online. More significantly, blended learning through the use of VLE can promote collaborative learning among students which is essential for their knowledge development so that students can improve their English skills which in turn can help them pass the standardized English test. However, the challenges of implementing VLE in this course also remain significant to take into account to be able to attain the learning goal of devising blended learning using VLE. Further, it is also important to assess the effectiveness of the use of VLE in this blended learning design, so it warrants an evaluation to embark on a constructive review of how this kind of blend can enhance English learning by developing its potential and improving its imperfections.

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