

# **Virtual Realities: A Blended Learning Approach to Bridge the Gap between Diverse ESL Learners**

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Learner Diversity has always been a major concern in the second language classroom. Due to cultural and learning style differences, students often find themselves in very diverse stages of learning in the same class. Teachers are well aware of the problem but due to large number of students in the class, very limited contact hours and a very exam oriented education system, they are unable to do much to cater for the diverse learners. Teachers often concentrate on the high flyers and the mediocre students. The weak students, who need more attention and guidance, are often neglected. To cater for the assorted needs of the diverse learner lessons must be very learner centered. As Mahendra et.al(2005) elucidate “Being learner-centered is about promoting a collaborative, supportive classroom culture, not a competitive, individualistic one”.

This paper would explore the possibilities of introducing a blended learning approach in the ESL classroom to circumnavigate the problem of learner diversity. As (Barkley.S.G 2001) propagates, “The ideal solution is to blend the best characteristics of online learning and onsite learning to provide the greatest support for acquisition of knowledge, modeling, practice, observation and coaching which are the five components of learning.” It will discuss the notion of learner diversity in the Malaysian context, the concept of blended learning, advantages of blended learning and some guidelines for the implementation of blended learning in Malaysia.

## **The Notion of Learner Diversity**

When students come to a class, they bring along with them a multitude of differences. These individual differences are the once that distinguish them as diverse learners. Dimitrova et.al (2003) identify the following as the main differences one may find among learners in general:

- ethnicity, gender, religion, disability;
- language, culture, communities;
- prior domain knowledge, pre-determined learning style, and individual approach to learning;
- personal motivation, and expectations; and
- social contexts of education, and learner's personal life style.

Often teachers fail to consider the diversities of the learners in planning their language lessons. This could be attributed to a number of factors as follows:

- Teachers' lack of knowledge about learner diversity and its consequences on second language learning
- limited number of hours allotted for English language teaching and learning
- large number of students in the class
- teachers overloaded with administrative work

While accepting the fact that it is impossible to cater for the every need of the individual learner, it is imperative for the language teacher to understand the diversities of the learners and look for unity in diversity to make the language learning process a truly meaningful experience.

### **Learner diversity in the Malaysian ESL classroom context**

The notion of learner diversity is very significant in the Malaysian ESL context as students in Malaysia come from a wide range of ethnic, cultural, dominant language, and socio-economic background.

#### **a. Ethnic and Religious Diversity**

There are several ethnic groups in Malaysia and students from each ethnic group brings along a very diverse attitude towards the English language. Some ethnic groups have a positive attitude towards English, whereas others may still consider it a colonial language. Religion too could create a positive or negative attitude towards a particular language.

#### **b. Socio-Economic Diversity**

Most students from the rural areas are from poor economic background and as such have limited access to resource materials outside school. They also cannot afford extra tuition. Due to the parent's limited education, they also have little or no

exposure to English language usage outside the school. Students from the urban areas on the other hand have better access to resources and tuition facilities. Many of them are also well exposed to the English language at home through usage. Very often when the rural and urban students come together in secondary and residential schools, this diversity is glaring.

**c. Personal motivation, and expectations**

Another diversity that is quite visible among students, especially in the secondary educational environment is the personal motivation and expectations of the students. Many of the students, especially from the lower socio-economic milieu have no clue of what they are going to do after school. They neither have ambitions nor plans for their future. Therefore they lack personal motivation and they have no expectations either. These are the students who cannot see the reason for learning English as a second language. These are students who need more attention and guidance from the teacher. A student who is highly motivated and has clear vision of his/her expectation would be able to complete a course very successfully with little help.

**d. Social contexts of education, and learner's personal life style**

As mentioned above, some students are much focused and very career orientated in pursuing their studies. Therefore they involuntarily develop a personal life style that is very goal oriented. On the other hand students who come from a non education focused social context rarely have a life style that is conducive to learning.

It is extremely important for a language teacher to be mindful of these diversities among students and have them at the back of the mind in planning and executing English language lessons. This is to ensure that the more proficient students will be encouraged to set higher targets while the low and mediocre students would be provided with a scaffolding to develop at their own phase without losing hope and focus.

To provide the much needed scaffolding and at the same time cater for the very demanding needs of the high flyers is a daunting task. With the very limited classroom contact hours and a very heavy workload coupled with large numbers of students, it is almost impossible for the English language teacher to plan and execute a variety of activities to cater for the needs of the diverse learners.

Blending a variety of learning approaches with the traditional face to face learning may offer a solution to the above mentioned dilemma of the EL teacher.

### **The concept of blended learning:**

Blended learning is a powerful teaching and learning approach that combines e-learning with a variety of other delivery methods for a superior learning experience. The following excerpt from Rosset & Kendra Sheldon offers a good explanation to blended learning:

*"There are brick and mortar options, such as coaching, classes, and mentoring. Then there are electronic options, ranging from e-learning classes, to on-line help systems, to templates, decision support tools, and knowledge bases. E-learning gurus Elliot Maisie and Brandon Hall recognize the many options and encourages combined systems, which they call 'brick and click,' or 'blended' learning" (Rossett & Kendra Sheldon, 2001, p.281).*

To put it a nutshell, blended learning is to combine the various aspects of traditional classroom, such as coaching, demonstrating, monitoring, explaining, facilitating etc with the various aspects of online learning.

### **Advantages of blended learning**

The advantage of this kind of blended learning is that it offers a welcome break from the monotony of classroom instruction. It allows the students to make choices about his/her learning such as:

- i. When I want to learn?
- ii. Where I want to learn?
- iii. What I want to learn?
- iv. How I want to learn?
- v. What are my goals?

As pointed out above, the teacher does not have the time to identify the strengths and weaknesses of all her students and design and execute activities that would cater for all their diverse needs. With blended learning, he can help students realize their own strengths and weaknesses and help them plan and carryout their language learning process outside the classroom via online learning.

#### *Diverse Learning styles*

One of the most important diversities in language learning that needs to be addressed is the diverse learning styles of individual learners. According to Felder and Silverman [1988] the four dimensions of learning style are, sensory/intuitive, visual/auditory, inductive/ deductive, and active/reflective. Biggs [1987] define three types of learning strategy: surface, deep and achieving. If these learning styles and strategies can be catered for during the language the learning process, learning would not only be effective but also a very enjoyable and motivating process. And the array of interactive learning activities offered by online learning can cater for at least some of the learning styles and strategies suggested above.

#### **Some guidelines for the implementation of blended learning in Malaysia:**

Valiathan (2002) offers three models of blended learning:

- skill-driven learning, which combines self-paced learning with instructor or facilitator support to develop specific knowledge and skills
- attitude-driven learning, which mixes various events and delivery media to develop specific behaviors

- competency-driven learning, which blends performance support tools with knowledge management resources and mentoring to develop workplace competencies

	<b>Why</b>	<b>How</b>
<b>Skill-Driven Model:</b>	Learning specific knowledge and skills requires regular feedback and support from the trainer, facilitator, or peer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• create a group-learning plan that's self-paced but bound to a strict schedule</li> <li>• pad self-paced learning material with instructor-led overview and closing sessions</li> <li>• demonstrate procedures and processes through synchronous online learning labs or a traditional classroom setting</li> <li>• provide email support</li> <li>• design long-term projects</li> </ul>
<b>Attitude-Driven Model</b>	Content that deals with developing new attitudes and behaviors requires peer-to-peer interaction and a risk-free environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hold synchronous Web-based meetings (Webinars)</li> <li>• assign group projects (to be completed offline)</li> <li>• conduct role-playing simulations</li> </ul>
<b>Competency-Driven Model</b>	To capture and transfer tacit knowledge, learners must interact with and observe experts on the job.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assign mentors</li> <li>• develop a knowledge repository (LCMS/LMS)</li> </ul>

For the purpose of this paper which focuses on blended learning for the upper secondary students, her skill driven model is considered most practical.

She also offers the following plan to help carried out the skill based blended learning as below:

	<b>Technology-based techniques</b>	<b>Non-technology based techniques</b>
<b>Announcement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LMS</li> <li>• email push</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• flyer</li> <li>• mail</li> <li>• phone</li> </ul>
<b>Overview session</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• email</li> <li>• Webinar</li> </ul>	traditional classroom
<b>Self-paced learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web-based tutorial</li> <li>• e-books</li> <li>• EPSS</li> <li>• simulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• articles</li> <li>• books</li> <li>• job-aids</li> <li>• on-the-job training</li> </ul>
<b>Query resolution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• email</li> <li>• FAQ</li> <li>• instant messenger</li> </ul>	face-to-face meeting
<b>Demonstration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web meeting</li> <li>• simulations</li> </ul>	traditional classroom
<b>Practice</b>	simulation	workbook assignment
<b>Feedback</b>	email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• face-to-face meeting</li> <li>• print report</li> </ul>
<b>Closing session</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• email</li> <li>• Webinar</li> </ul>	traditional classroom
<b>Certification</b>	Web-based test	print test

## Conclusion

Teaching and learning is an evolutionary process. It has evolved from a total teacher dependent stage to an almost teacher less environment. The advent of computer and other technologies have made teaching and learning a very dynamic process. The power of the technological platform and the skills of the teacher should be blended to offer an exhilarating and totally rewarding learning experience to learners at all levels. A well blended learning program should be able to cater for the diverse needs of most learners.

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