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BLENDED LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: INTEGRATING FACE-TO-FACE AND DIGITAL LEARNING TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract
This article examines blended learning (FFL) as a pedagogical model of teaching English as a foreign language (FFL), aimed at integrating traditional face-to-face learning with digital and online components. The study analyzes the modern theoretical foundations of blended learning, practical models of its implementation in the context of FFL, as well as empirical data on its impact on language acquisition, student independence and learning motivation. The results show that a well-designed blended learning environment significantly improves language outcomes and student engagement, provided that digital tools are purposefully aligned with communicative learning goals, and teachers have the necessary training and institutional support.

Keywords: Blended learning, English as a foreign language, digital learning, online learning, language acquisition, student autonomy, technologically enriched language learning, flipped classroom, Uzbekistan.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the field of English language teaching has undergone dramatic changes under the influence of the rapid spread of digital technologies. Interactive platforms, learning management systems, video conferencing tools, and mobile apps have opened up fundamentally new opportunities for language practice, feedback, and access to authentic materials that are not available in traditional classroom learning. In these conditions, blended learning – a systematic combination of face-to-face teaching with online activities and digital learning resources – has established itself as one of the most promising and widely used pedagogical models in modern IRA teaching.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically accelerated this transformation. Educational institutions around the world were forced to switch to a fully remote

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format in a short time, which fully exposed both the opportunities and limitations of technology-mediated language learning. As face-to-face teaching resumes, many teachers and administrators are choosing not to abandon the digital tools and practices developed during the pandemic, but to meaningfully integrate them into a mixed model that combines the social saturation of face-to-face interaction with the flexibility and accessibility of online resources.

In the context of FLA learning, particularly in Uzbekistan, where English is taught primarily in the school and university classroom with limited authentic contact with the language outside the classroom, blended learning is of particular importance. The digital environment has the potential to dramatically increase students' access to authentic English-language input—through streaming media services, online corpora, digital libraries, and global communication platforms—thereby filling the language deficit that characterizes most IRA contexts.

This article aims to present a theoretically grounded and empirically supported analysis of blended learning in the teaching of the IRA. It examines three key questions: what theoretical foundations explain the effectiveness of blended learning in language acquisition; how blended learning is implemented in the classes of the IRA and what models turned out to be the most effective; This is evidenced by the available evidence base on the impact of blended learning on language competence, independence and motivation of students.

2. Theoretical foundations of blended learning

Blended learning is not limited to the logistical distribution of study time between face-to-face and online formats. In its most consistent interpretation, it is a rethinking of the educational environment in accordance with established theories of learning and language acquisition. A number of theoretical concepts are especially important for understanding the mechanisms of the effectiveness of blended learning in the context of the IRA.

The constructivist theory of learning, associated primarily with the name of L.S. Vygotsky (1978) and developed in the field of educational technologies in the works of Jonassen (1999), proceeds from the fact that students actively construct knowledge in the process of activity, reflection and social interaction. Blended learning environments can embody constructivist principles: digital assignments require students to actively participate — online research, create multimedia products, co-

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edit wiki pages — while face-to-face classes provide collaborative meaning-building and prompt feedback from the teacher and peers.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) theory of self-determination offers a motivational model that is highly relevant to blended IRA teaching. According to this theory, the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and belonging—is a prerequisite for intrinsic motivation. Online blended course components support autonomy by allowing learners to choose when, where, and at their own pace to work with digital materials. Face-to-face classes fulfill the need for belonging through social interaction and building a learning community. When digital tasks are correctly correlated with language proficiency, they also create a sense of growing competence that supports intrinsic motivation.

From the point of view of the theory of second language acquisition, blended learning relies on the Input-Output cycle, theoretically substantiated in the works of Krashen (1985), Long (1996) and Swain (1995). The online environment provides an abundant easy-to-understand input through authentic digital texts, podcasts, and videos. Asynchronous discussion forums and collaboration platforms provide structured opportunities for written output and interaction. Face-to-face classes, in turn, create the conditions for real-time negotiation of meaning—the very interactive process that Long's interaction hypothesis identifies as critical to learning. A well-designed blended course thus covers all three components of the cycle in a complementary and mutually reinforcing way.

3. Blended learning models in the practice of teaching the IRA

Researchers and practitioners identify a number of blended learning models, each reflecting different perceptions of the relative role of face-to-face and online components. Graham (2006) proposed a basic typology that distinguishes mixing at the level of an individual lesson, course, and educational program; however, course-level mixing—where the entire IRA curriculum is restructured around a combination of face-to-face and digital elements—is the most studied in the IRA literature.

The model of the "flipped classroom" deserves special attention in the practice of teaching the IRA. In this model, the presentation of new material — presentation of vocabulary, explanation of grammatical rules, listening exercises — is transferred to the online space and performed by students before the lesson, and classroom time is freed up for communicative tasks, discussions, and joint work that require

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pedagogical support. Research in the context of IRA suggests that a flipped classroom increases the proportion of time devoted to meaningful communication, which has a positive effect on fluency and interactive competence (Kim et al., 2014). The model also develops students' independence, as it assumes their personal responsibility for completing online tasks independently.

Originally designed for schooling, the station rotation model organizes lesson time around multiple learning stations—online activity, teacher-led small group work, and collaborative assignments—between which students alternately move. In an adapted form for university courses of the IRA, this model allows for differentiated learning: while one group practices pronunciation using an online application, another receives targeted grammar feedback from the teacher, and the third performs an oral communicative task. The flexibility of the model makes it particularly suitable for heterogeneous IRA groups, where language proficiency levels vary significantly.

Asynchronous online components, implemented through Moodle or Canvas learning management systems, constitute another important dimension of the blended IRA course. Discussion forums, where students post answers to reading or listening assignments and comment on the work of fellow students, provide structured writing practice and develop the argumentation and discourse management skills necessary for academic English. Online tests and adaptive exercises provide immediate, personalized feedback that is not possible with mass face-to-face learning. Digital portfolio tools allow students to record progress over time, developing metacognitive awareness and a reflective attitude towards learning.

4. Problems of Implementation of Blended Learning in the Conditions of the IRA

Despite strong evidence of effectiveness, blended learning comes with significant practical challenges that must be overcome to make its benefits a reality. These challenges exist at the level of individual learners, teachers and educational institutions, and are particularly pronounced in IRA contexts characterized by limited technological infrastructure and traditional pedagogical culture.

The digital divide is a fundamental problem. Blended learning means that all students have reliable access to devices and the internet outside of the educational institution. In many IRA contexts, including in rural areas and less affluent urban communities in Central Asia, this assumption is not true. Students without home internet access are unable to complete online assignments, participate in asynchronous discussions, or

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use digital resources, creating a two-tier system where the benefits of blended learning are unevenly distributed. Institutional measures, such as the provision of computer labs with extended working hours, the issuance of tablet devices, the development of tasks that do not require constant connectivity, are necessary but often remain underfunded.

Teachers' professional competence and confidence in working with digital tools represent the second significant barrier. Effective teaching in a blended format places high demands on professionalism: not only technical skills in working with learning management systems and digital applications are required, but also pedagogical judgment — the ability to select appropriate tools, build coherent methodological sequences, and quickly solve technical problems without disrupting the learning process. Many teachers of the IRA do not have such training, since they were educated within the framework of the traditions of grammatical translation or audiolingual methods. Professional development programs for blended learning should combine technical knowledge with deep pedagogical reflection on how to purposefully integrate digital and face-to-face components, rather than simply alternating between them.

Students' readiness for independent online work constitutes a third challenge specific to the contexts of the IRA. Many learners, especially those who have been educated in a tradition of teacher-centered learning, lack the learning skills, time management, and intrinsic motivation to productively complete asynchronous online assignments. In the absence of direct social responsibility from the classroom, online assignments are easily postponed or completed formally. To support students in developing the independent learning skills that blended learning requires, special support strategies are needed – structured sequences of online assignments, mechanisms of mutual responsibility between partners, regular follow-up meetings with the teacher.

5. Evidence base for the effectiveness of blended learning in the IRA

A growing body of empirical research convincingly confirms the effectiveness of blended learning in teaching IRA. Meta-analyses by Means et al. (2013) and Waugh et al. (2017) show that blended learning consistently delivers higher learning outcomes compared to exclusively face-to-face or exclusively online formats, with effect sizes being pedagogically relevant to diverse learner populations and educational contexts.

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Studies specifically devoted to IRA have documented significant improvements in reading comprehension, writing quality, vocabulary acquisition, and oral fluency achieved through blended learning programs. Notably, the most pronounced benefits are in the area of vocabulary acquisition: the combination of digital spaced repetition tools such as Quizlet or Anki with face-to-face communicative practice creates optimal conditions for deep coding and long-term retention of lexical units. In blended courses, students regularly encounter target vocabulary in a variety of modalities and contexts, which fully meets the conditions for both concomitant and intentional vocabulary acquisition identified in the works of Nation (2001).

Research conducted in the context of university teaching of the IRA in Central Asia supports these findings. Karimova (2021), who studied students at an Uzbek university, found that participants in the blended IRA course demonstrated significantly higher scores on syntactic complexity and coherence of written texts compared to the control group studying in the traditional format. Participants also reported higher levels of engagement and satisfaction, attributing this to the flexibility of online components and the more interactive nature of face-to-face classes, freed from the need to submit new material.

Student autonomy, the most important long-term outcome of IRA learning, is also positively correlated with blended learning. Students who regularly engage with digital materials at their own pace develop metacognitive awareness of their own learning processes, improve their progress monitoring skills, and show a greater willingness to seek authentic English-language input outside of the formal curriculum. These autonomous learning skills are among the most reliable predictors of long-term success in the development of IRA and are rarely developed within the framework of traditional classroom training.

6. Conclusion

Blended learning is a mature, theoretically grounded and empirically supported pedagogical model that meets the needs and capabilities of modern IRA teaching exceptionally well. By combining the interpersonal richness of face-to-face interaction with the flexibility, accessibility, and multimodal resources of the digital environment, blended learning solves the central task of teaching IRA: to provide the most intense, meaningful contact with the language being studied, both in and out of the classroom.

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The difficulties of implementation, such as digital inequality, insufficient training of teachers, and poor educational independence, are real, but they can be overcome with targeted investments in infrastructure, professional development, and student support. In the Uzbek context of FLA education, where English language proficiency is increasingly recognized as a strategic priority for national development, such an investment is not only pedagogically desirable, but also strategically necessary.

Further research should focus on longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of blended learning on students' language competence and autonomy, as well as design studies aimed at developing context-sensitive models of blended IRA teaching adapted to Central Asian educational settings. The integration of AI-based adaptive learning tools into blended IRA programs represents a particularly promising direction for future research, opening up opportunities for further personalization of the digital component and providing students with real, individualized feedback in a scalable format.

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