Review Article

Blended Learning in Senegal

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of English Language Teaching (ELT) especially blended learning whereby English is taught as a foreign language in Senegal, a francophone country. The validity of blended learning method is twofold. On the one hand, it is explainable by the advent of new technologies in the last decades of the twenty first century and the English language (EL) to satisfy a communicative need in all domains across the world. On the other hand, it is justified by the challenges of the traditional learning and teaching methods in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic that fully induce educational authorities to rethink the face-to-face traditional learning style. Thus the study is a succinct scrutiny, at the crossroads of "smart" and face-to-face learning, that questions the above-mentioned learning medium, i.e., blended learning, as a safe and comprehensive teaching and learning method in the twenty first century in Senegal.
Keywords: Blended learning, foreign, language, technologies, face-to-face.

INTRODUCTION

Whatever domain it might concern, teaching and learning abide by different approaches and methods. The English language (EL) is not an exception to that changing rule that generally shifts its purposes regarding the worldwide undercurrent context and the learner's need. Besides, the origin of the various components of ELT is intrinsically related to context and purpose. For instance, the origin of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), one component of ELT, is analyzed as threefold, *the demands of a Brave New World*, *a revolution in linguistics* and *the focus on the learner* (Hutchington and Waters, 1987: 6-8). Likewise, the growing need of English language is contextualized through the concept of globalization, the nineteenth century industrial revolution and the crucial emergency for people to communicate, especially in international trade and affairs. But it is essential to note here that the unique and most common learning method of the English language in education has generally been implemented through teacher-learner face-to-face interactions within a physical environment set. It is important to clarify then, teaching and learning is not static, it is rather dynamic. Interestingly enough, if we agree that teaching and learning is not static, we will surely corroborate to some theorists' digital orientation applied to learning. Education and learning are intertwining branches. In previous decades, learning has always been associated with the physical presence of schools, classrooms, examination halls, teachers, textbooks and examinations (Eddy, Nor-Aziah, & Jasmine in Ma'arop & Embi, 2016: 41). It is unquestionable that the advent of new technologies has a huge impact on the traditional face-to-face learning as Smartphones, (desktop) computers, laptops, tablets, to name but a few, are here to stay and the integration in the teaching process is inevitable. Multimedia-enhanced CALL is easily capable of creating learning situations of great fidelity or authenticity, both through the presentation of images of realia and through audio and video input that can present real world situations as realistically as television but with greater interaction" (Beatty, 2003 : 22). Given that the combination of face-to-face learning and the integration of multimedia in the teaching process exist as a connecting rod, a vicinity between the two, which evidences the blended learning approach of EL. Blended learning is a flexible model that can support a project or course of study to progress whilst not requiring teachers and learners to be in the same physical space at all times (European Commission, 2020: 4).

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1

Thoroughly speaking, blended learning appears as a teaching mode that plays a supporting role in ELT alongside face-to-face traditional learning. It helps levitate learner's performance that is very often than not tenuously achievable in the past. The case in study typifies Senegal in a context whereby English is learned as a foreign language and where new technologies are used in full swing.

1. Contextual Framework

Education is one of the pillars of economic and social development. Senegal, the case study, has an educational policy that brings in its forefront the teaching of English in its curricula and syllabi for the development of communicative skills of learners. But even though fully engrained in the Senegalese educational system, the teaching and learning mode has often been implemented with the physical presence of schools, institutes, universities, materials and logistics for the sake of training. From the above, we can safely say that, before the advent of new technologies during the last decades of the twentieth century in Senegal, the educational learning style was merely a face-to-face learning style. But with the birth rate increase that has inevitably resulted in large classrooms, the inaccessibility of textbooks, physical facilities or schools and classrooms, with rapidly growing digital devices, there is a displacement of purpose regarding the learning approach. As already been said, the common use of blended learning occurs in the digital era, but the ticking point still remains the side effects of 2021's health crisis, with the covid-19. In actual fact, to avoid the spread of the virus, learners of all walks of life are compelled to change attitude regarding social interactions to conform to the restrictive sanitary measures of social distancing. Senegal does not escape to this sad rule that has emanated from the new social sanitary context. The above-mentioned factors justify a more pronounced interest in smart learning and the validity, adoption and adaptation of new technologies in the implementation of pedagogical activities, workshops, presentations, conferences, lectures, and what not, in the Senegalese educational system, from primary school to academic level, not to mention the professional sector. In effect, the first Virtual University of Senegal was enacted in 2013 in order to meet the educational authorities' expectations of the twenty first century's overall expansion in the learning milieu. The Higher Education and Research sub-sector is subject to a real problem of access. Projections on the number of baccalaureate holders from 2012 to 2022 show a very significant rate of increase which cannot be absorbed by the construction projects of new public higher education institutions (Journal Officiel, 2013).

More interestingly, there is a perfect harmony between the three cardinal advantages of blended learning, *flexibility, cost efficiencies* and the capacities to create *collaborative teacher learning community* (Kennedy, 2021:12), and the Senegalese educational authorities' concerns about the learning experience and the development of professional skills as defined by the Orientation Law on Education, 1991that seeks : […] a training that blends school to life, theory to practice, teaching to production, designed as an educational activity that vows to contribute to the development of mental faculties and manual skills of learners, while preparing them to a harmonious integration into professional life (Journal Officiel, 1991).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Blended learning is part and parcel of ELT. It has intensively been discussed by theorists across the world in its various aspects, i.e., its benefits and challenges. In their study, "A Narrative inquiry into EFL Teachers' Professional Experiences in Blended Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic", Ma'rufa & Mustofa insist on the advantageous aspects of blended learning in education domain. Blended learning means integrating the web and face-to-face methods to make the effectiveness experience both for the teacher and the learner, so blended learning becomes a constructivist approach that features the potential to transfer better education in line with the development of technology (Ma'rufa & Mustofa, 2021: 2). It is clear from the above that the importance of technology is one of the catalytic conditions of blended learning, whatever it is applied to. Analyzing the prerequisite of new technologies of blended learning in Mathematics, M. C. Borba *et al*., come back to the essential need of technologies for mankind's better life, Digital technology has changed the very notion of what being a human means… massive open online courses (MOOCs) and touch technology are terms that are part of our lives as mathematics educators, and many of these terms are part of the daily lives of 45 % of the world population that has access to the internet (Borba, 2016). This shows, once again, the interdisciplinary use of blended learning that can be inevitably applied to mathematics, medicine, management and to any other discipline. To come back to the case study of Senegal as an EFL context, blended learning holds a host of benefits as the country's internet penetration rate, with 46%, is far away from being satisfactory and conducive to blended learning. Even though most of the bulk of research on blended learning has an inclination to smart learning, a successful blended learning always resides in putting up the challenges that are inherent to internet issues, logistics, teachers and learners 'computer literacy for a better implementation of the flipped classroom model.

3. The Flipped Classroom Approach

Blended Learning being an approach to teaching that combines online materials and online interaction with traditional face-to-face class time, encompasses the concept of flipped classroom. The latter is a pedagogical model in which the typical learning and teaching process of a course is reversed,

Therefore, students receive the activities and assignments at home before the class session. Whereas, class time is devoted to exercises, projects, presentations and discussions, etc.

In the Senegalese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where learners need more time and space elsewhere out of school to conduct effective project-based learning, the flipped classroom is but a real asset. Here, class time is managed more efficiently; it also makes learners save time as they become engaged in both collaborative and autonomous activities, which also enhances, somehow, learner autonomy. To this extent, Bergmann and Sams (2012, 13) state that the reversed traditional learning environment is perceived as follows: 'which is traditionally done in class is now done at home, and that which is traditionally done as homework is now completed in class." In addition, the flipped lesson is more effective than a non-flipped one provided that it straightforward impacts on the English language learners' academic performance, their learning attitude and participation levels (Hung, 2015).

In short, in the Senegalese EFL context where learners have to be provided more time and learning opportunities outside the classroom, the reversed traditional class known as flipped class can make students gain considerable advantages that truly meet the objectives of a flipped classroom. Thereby, this topical learning model may allow today's learners to:

- Make the classroom an active learning environment,
- Enable students to learn at their own pace, which encourages learner autonomy in this 21st century,
- Give the instructor more time to teach each student,
- Focus class time on students' understanding, rather than on lecture,
- Increase student-teacher interactions,
- And allow teachers to know their students better.

So, the variety of students' learning styles and opportunities is more effective when the traditional teaching approach is reversed. From this perspective, another facet the present research paper is meant to explore some tips on how to implement the online phase that plays an outstanding role in the process of reversing such a physical presence class conduct.

4. Online Teaching Implementation Phase

Technology is unavoidable when it comes to implement a reversed classroom. Thus, blending the teacher/learning process equals resorting, at large, to topical online tools that facilitate the process. Thus, a certain number of useful online applications to implement blended learning become useful to provide resourceful pedagogic outcomes. In fact, applications such as Google Classroom, Whatsapp, Zoom or Google meet, can help the online educational system improve.

More, these applications cannot be talked about without mentioning some technological devices that facilitate their availability in the internet. Therefore, the smartphones, the tablets, the laptops, the computer, to name but these, are of great help in the process of blended learning.

From this standpoint, Google classroom and Zoom applications are relevant examples of online tools to implement blended learning as they are complementary. While the former favors an effective asynchronous learning environment, the latter is an effective tool to teach synchronously through a live model.

Google Classroom

This application is a free online tool for teachers and students. With it, teachers can create an online classroom, invite students to the class, then create and distribute assignments, the advantages of Google Classroom are as various as beneficial to the teaching / learning community. This application can:

- Save time and paper
- Make it easier to create a class you may reuse
- Facilitate assignments submissions and communication
- Make students be able to access quickly to the course resources
- Make students turn in assignments and get assessed virtually
- Etc.

In the same vein, the following steps can help create a Google Classroom and set up an online class:

- Assist learners to create a Google account
- Download a Google Classroom on the device (Smartphone, for instance)
- Get into Google and fine Google classroom in the 9-dot square as represented by ⦂⦂⦂
- Create a class and give it a name
- Ask students to pass you their Gmail accounts to get invited to the class
- Sent students the link via the mails or Whatsapp to click on and get into the class
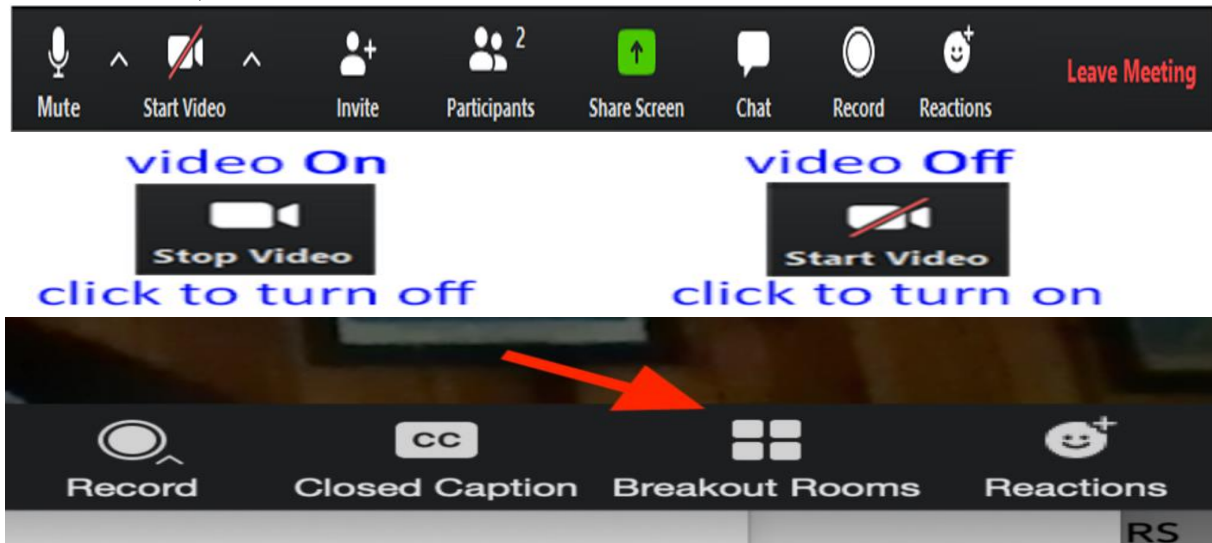- A code is also provided to facilitate students' presence in the class.

The Zoom Application

Zoom is a web conferencing platform that is used for audio and/or video conferencing. You need a free account to start your own calls for up to 100 people; paid versions can support up to 1, 000 people, and you can make calls, hold unlimited meetings, and even record both (www.Google.com/search).

The Zoom application is to be downloaded once on Google, play store or apple store. Then, you

can create an account, ask students to download it too. Some of its features are as follow:

The tips above may help professional educators in using the zoom features and useful terms for a good conduct of the meeting sessions with learners. These learners should know about these features and be able to use them properly to attend efficiently a live lesson, which is a synchronous learning environment and different from Google Classroom that is a good tool for asynchronous activities.

5. Recommendations and Implications

Blended learning in an EFL context, especially in Senegal, is worth considering for the sake of providing more relevant outcomes in favor of the learning community, parents and decision-makers. Thus, as a review of studies on the issue states, "Blended learning has played an important role both in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning field around the world for years now. However, no systematic review of literature has been conducted on this domain in EFL environment" (Atlay *et al*., 2019). Therefore, in the Senegalese EFL/ESL context, we deem necessary to explore a general picture of Blended Learning that should be everyone's matter. In fact, from the educational authorities to teachers, parents and students, Blended Learning implementation awareness is highly recommended provided that the world is not static; it is changing, hence a real need to adapt and adopt topical teaching/learning channels. In this regard, Senegal's school authorities should, as everywhere else, provide projects on hybrid teaching/learning on tools and make school actors get more familiar with it. In addition, given that technology is expending and gaining more and more ground throughout the world, parents should bear in mind that technology devices are not only for social networks for various minor needs; rather, these devices can efficiently participate in the emancipation of knowledge by the educational system through Smartphones, tablets, laptops, and computers.

Nowadays, teachers should have a high responsibility in the implementation of Blended Learning as technological devices are affordable, at large. More still, they should, with the help of school authorities, accept to get in touch with technology and use it efficiently for learners. These learners should be given opportunities to collaborate within themselves in the use of online applications like Google classroom and Zoom. Besides, Google Drive, PDF, Word and PowerPoint Readers should be known and mastered by today's learners through teachers and parents' sensitization and help. In a nutshell, any initiative taken in the realm of the educational system to promote Blended Learning is now a topical recommendation and highly welcome globally.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, teaching methods and materials can be easily revisited and improved because technology offers, day in, day out, outstanding opportunities to both practitioners and the learning community. As a result of this trend, Blended Learning has become an unavoidable approach to adopt in order to alternate the face-to-face teaching/learning environment and online course sessions to better engage students and make them active mainly in their learning process.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language in Senegal, as anywhere else, these findings have been well considered: the relevance of technology in the educational environment, the implications of topical online tools and their practical terms of use, the flipped classroom promoting learner autonomy, constitute important aspects that practitioners and students must value. Students are not empty vessels; with project-based learning, thanks to the hybrid approach, they can take the lead and share the best of them when learning possibilities of the kind are offered

to facilitate an alternative process. In a nutshell, the combination of online courses and physical presence courses enhanced by technology is an asset to be grabbed at large in a Foreign Language context for a new pedagogic soaring to break classroom routine.

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