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## Blended learning and second language acquisition in the classroom

Victoria R. Hamilton  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## Blended learning and second language acquisition in the classroom

### Abstract

This review investigates using a blended learning environment within a second language setting. The literature review presented three main themes to be considered as these two contexts were united: learner engagement in differing environments and with different activities, learner perceptions, and the outcomes found from such combinations. Twenty-eight peer-reviewed journal articles were analyzed. It is found that blended environments seem to add novelty and increase motivation and engagement of students in these settings. However, the pedagogical implementation of active learning such as collaboration, providing feedback, and using activities that have a communicative purpose seems to yield the best results. Learner perceptions are more or less positive with a few exceptions. Outcomes seem to exceed or equal those produced in a traditional educational setting. Recommendations for future research include engaging in more research in the secondary level.

Blended Learning and Second Language Acquisition in the Classroom

A Graduate Review

Submitted to the

Division of Instructional Technology

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Victoria R. Hamilton

August, 2018

## BLENDED LEARNING AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

This Review by: Victoria R. Hamilton

Titled: Blended Learning and Second Language Acquisition

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Approved

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Graduate Faculty Reader

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Date Approved

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Date Approved

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Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

## BLENDED LEARNING AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

### **Abstract**

This review investigates using a blended learning environment within a second language setting. The literature review presented three main themes to be considered as these two contexts were united: learner engagement in differing environments and with different activities, learner perceptions, and the outcomes found from such combinations. Twenty-eight peer-reviewed journal articles were analyzed. It is found that blended environments seem to add novelty and increase motivation and engagement of students in these settings. However, the pedagogical implementation of active learning such as collaboration, providing feedback, and using activities that have a communicative purpose seems to yield the best results. Learner perceptions are more or less positive with a few exceptions. Outcomes seem to exceed or equal those produced in a traditional educational setting. Recommendations for future research include engaging in more research in the secondary level.

*Keywords:* blended learning, computer-assisted language learning, second language acquisition, modern language, Spanish, online learner, motivation, collaboration, engagement

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## BLENDED LEARNING AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

### **Blended Learning and Second Language Acquisition**

Typical memories of learning a second language may include memorizing and applying grammatical structures and lists of vocabulary (Center for Language Teaching Advancement, 2014). These practices have expanded in the classroom to include more of a focus on communication. Languages are thought to be acquired by understanding messages and providing comprehensible listening and reading opportunities (Van Patten, 2017; Krashen, 1985). The more input, listening, and reading a person interprets, the more language he/she has the potential to acquire and use when producing messages for others. Much like a baby will hear lots of language prior to talking; so do successful second language learners. The unique situation with second language learners in a K-12 environment is they have the physical ability to speak and write, unlike a baby. Thus, they can show understanding in ways other than pointing, grinning, or even sometimes one-word answers. Previously, languages were often taught using a model that presented a rule, practiced that rule, and then tested it (Center for Language Teaching Advancement, 2013). Communication and giving and receiving meaning, were not at the heart of this model.

According to Van Patten (2017), in order to approach *acquisition*, learners need to understand a lot of input through reading and listening so they can begin to mimic and absorb natural usage of a language (Krashen, 1998). Over time, they begin to produce language and internalize relatively unconsciously how the language works; thus, being able to produce more complex output, speaking and writing products (Van Patten, 2017; Krashen, 1985). It is recommended that speaking and writing focus on communicative goals rather than only grammatical ones (Center for Language Teaching Advancement, 2014; Van Patten, 2016). For example, students could communicate about a topic that naturally encourages the use of a

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grammatical concept, instead of a fill-in-the-blank worksheet without context.

Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are difficult to isolate. Comprehending the message being communicated is the first step in acquisition; being able to respond appropriately and establish communication creates a communicative context (Chapelle, C. A., 2009; Van Patten, 2017). Stated differently, successful reading and listening allows a person to appropriately respond using speaking or writing skills. It is difficult to respond appropriately unless the original message has been understood. Even a course focused on speaking, provides the students with a topic to talk about through context, often using reading and listening to build background. When students are having conversations on a topic, they are speaking *and* listening. It is important to consider the role of communication as we attempt to fit these understandings of teaching a language into current opportunities for educating students. Creating an appropriate context and ample opportunity for reading, listening, writing, and speaking is important to keep in mind as we explore new pedagogical ideas and environments.

Blended learning is one such learning opportunity for students. It can consist of multiple combinations of face-to-face time (F2F)—which can occur virtually or in-person—and individual student online-time (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Rice, 2012). In many of the studies comparing blended learning to other learning situations, the term, “traditional learning” is used. Alasraj and Alharbi distinguished between *traditional* and *blended* learning. Traditional learning happens only in a classroom and in-person. They view blended learning that is “a mix of both traditional learning and internet-based learning” (2014, p. 13). Other definitions refer to blended learning as a synonym to hybrid learning where some sort of interaction between the instructor and students happens within a hybrid, or blended



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framework (Godev, 2014).

A blended learning model used to teach a second language has the potential to provide a new framework for engagement, a new opportunity to investigate learner perceptions, and the possibility for improved learning outcomes. Naqvi and Al Mahrooqi (2016) found in their study that “educators have started looking for techniques that could enhance learner motivation, engagement, and autonomy” (p. 49) and that various technologies may offer such possibilities. Such terms as engagement seem to have many definitions. Some use it to refer to learners exhibiting effort and willingness to complete a task (Grgurovic, 2011). Others measure engagement with time-on-task or completion of a specific number of tasks (Godev, 2014; Hampels & Pleines, 2013), or as “active involvement of the student for learning activities” (Aycicek & Yelken, 2018, p. 387).

One can investigate each of these forms of using various engagement statistics taken from learning management systems and surveys. Surveys were very popular throughout the studies reviewed. Both teachers and students participated in them and reported on engagement and perceptions of the experience. Other studies concentrated on learning outcomes (Challob, Bakar, & Latif, 2016; Dell’Aria & Incalcaterra McLoughlin, 2013; Isiguzel, 2014; Kirkgoz, 2011; Moreno-Lopez, Ramos-Sellman, Miranda-Aldaco, and Gomis Quinto, 2017; Yang, Gamble, Hung, and Lin, 2014).

There are many aspects to consider as one moves a second language class into a blended environment. This reviewer is mostly concerned with the learner and teacher experiences that are affected by combining these two frameworks. A few questions that are of particular concern to the reviewer are centered around engagement, perceptions, and learning outcomes:

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- What are the perceptions of second language learners regarding blended learning environment?
- How can we best engage second language learners in a blended learning environment?
- What outcomes have been found regarding language learning within blended learning environments?

This review tries to focus on the high school environment. However, the research seems to be limited at this level. Most studies take place in a higher education context. In order to gain some insight into the above questions, it is first required to engage in an exploration of how blended learning has been used in second language learning environments in general. Many commonalities were found within studies from various education levels. These generalities are of particular interest as educators can apply them to their area of expertise and level. To reiterate, an exploration of how blended learning and second language learning can work together to create positive experiences and outcomes is the focus.

Blended learning can involve many forms of interactions that require online activity and can, but do not necessitate, face-to-face time meeting as a class (Conrad & Donaldson; 2012; Rice, 2012). This review attempts to investigate blended learning that has an element of face-to-face time via in-person or through technology and an online component in some variant. From there, the goal is to inform ideas about what a blended learning environment that fosters engagement could look like, and that promotes positive learning outcomes. The intent of this literature review is that the reviewer will use the uncovered research models to begin developing a blended program for her own school district.

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### **Methodology**

This literature review is seeking to find recommendations to create a successful and engaging blended learning environment that fosters language acquisition. Finding information about blended learning was not a difficult task. It yielded many search results. The focus of this review is the use of blended learning within a language-learning context. The reviewer began by using the specific terms of blended learning and Spanish. From there, she kept broadening terms and used Boolean operators within each of the search tools. These included opening the search to include second language learning, modern language, among others. When using a search engine or database that offered the option, the search was further narrowed to peer-reviewed research studies within a secondary school context. The reviewer quickly widened the search to other educational levels due to a lack of research in the K-12 environment.

Google Scholar, One Search, and ERIC EBSCO were used to find articles. The search terms that yielded the most useful articles were blended learning, coupled with using these terms with Boolean operators, second language learning, modern language, or Spanish. Blended learning acted as a subject heading in ERIC and helped the reviewer to find articles about flipped and hybrid learning, which are included under the umbrella of blended learning. Other search terms that yielded informative articles from the English as a Second Language discipline were CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and second language acquisition.

Both forward and backward snowball techniques were used when a helpful article or dissertation was found. Google Scholar facilitates finding citations well. One can see who has cited the article by forward snowballing and searching for the abstracts of articles found

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on others' reference lists. Backward snowballing was used after finding the dissertation by Anderson (2016). The dissertation itself had a focus on pedagogical and administrative decisions with regard to basic language courses. Due to the current publication date of 2016, eight recent articles were snowballed from this source. Foundational sources such as this and those by Krashen (1985; 1998) were included for foundational and contextual purposes.

Overall, to be considered as a reference, resources that included specifically *Spanish* and *blended learning* in the title, subject, or abstract were given first priority. Many that included a discussion of *second language learning* in general and blended learning environments that occurred in a secondary environment were prioritized next. It was necessary to allow for articles within a post-secondary environment and for those within a English as a second or foreign language context. Preference was given to sources published between 2008-2018 with the exception being foundational materials. Due to the limited scope of sources available that were specific to blended learning and Spanish, the search was expanded to second language and modern language contexts. The most important characteristics for inclusion were the time period and the relevance of the topic.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Blended learning comes in different forms and uses different strategies to engage learners than in a typical face-to-face classroom. Generally, blended learning refers to a combination of online and in-class elements (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Rice, 2012). Current practices in second language learning contexts are beginning to focus on communication and using the four main language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. It is necessary to review how blended learning and second language teaching have been practiced in tandem. It is also useful to find patterns in what students find engaging

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about this model of teaching. The following review explores the three themes: second language learners' perceptions of blended learning; engaging second language learners in a blended learning environment; and second language learner outcomes in a blended learning environment.

### **Second Language Learners' Perceptions of Blended Learning**

What are learner perceptions? Addressing this question needs to begin by defining perception. None of the reviewed studies directly defined perception. However, a definition can be found by analyzing how the word, perception, was used within these studies. Goertler, Bollen, and Gaff (2012) and Ferguson (2016) used it to refer to student attitudes and reactions in regard to blended learning. Perception can also be determined by measuring student motivation, or willingness to do work within a blended environment because they enjoy the work (Isiguzel, 2014). Karabulut, Leville, Li, and Suvorov (2012) used the word, expectations, when discussing learner perceptions prior to an experience. Based upon the aspects described in these studies, this review will define perception to be "what students think or believe about a blended learning environment. It will encompass their opinions, attitudes, expectations, and preferences toward blended and second language learning." Many conditions can influence these perceptions: 1) novelty; 2) the age and language level of the learner; 3) the device used; 4) the option for independence and choice; 5) comfort level with blended learning, devices, and tools; 6) opportunities for feedback; and 7) learner expectations.

**Novelty.** Using online components for a K-12 class can add novelty, especially if used with handheld devices (Tingir, Cavlazoglu, Caliskan, Koklus, & Intepe-Tingir, 2017). As with all novelties, the effects can wear off during the K-12 experience for students

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(Tingir, et al., 2017). The older the students - the faster the novelty effect wore off. Ferguson (2016) studied middle-school students (grades 6-8) and found that the novelty effect of using iPads diminished as students aged as well. Overall, the majority of students reported that using iPads made learning more fun and productive, though the findings were not more specific than that (Ferguson, 2016).

**Age/Language Level.** The age of a learner appears to affect his/her views about the blended learning experience. A blended environment opens up the option for different types of activities. The younger the students, the more open they were to using asynchronous tools (Pinto-Llorente, Sánchez-Gómez, García-Peñalvo, & Casillas-Martín, 2017). Learners aged between 20-29 years were more willing to use podcasts, videocasts, and other online tools than their older counterparts (Naqvi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2016).

Age and language level do not necessarily coincide. If a person is first learning a language, s/he is a novice learner; however, a person can begin learning a language at any age. A few studies mention language proficiency as a condition that influences the opinions or expectations of a second language learner in a blended environment (Karabulut, et al., 2012; Gascoigne & Parnel). One mentioned how this influenced learner perceptions in a general way and the other was very specific. For Gascoigne and Parnel (2014), more advanced language learners had an easier time with the blended environment. They did not investigate why this was the case; but, they did put forth the idea that many blended environments require a great deal of reading and writing. These skills are easier once a learner knows more language than a novice (Gascoigne & Parnel, 2014). Karabulut, et al. (2012) found that novice learners and advanced language learners valued tools differently--namely online dictionaries used to access course materials. Advanced learners did not view

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online dictionaries as very useful. Advanced learners typically had a larger vocabulary and could access course and media materials without the aid of online dictionaries. Novice learners felt very much the opposite--they used them frequently and viewed them as essential.

**Type of Device.** Another condition that can influence students' perceptions about blended language learning is the type of device used: mobile (e.g., phone), tablet (e.g., iPad), or a laptop. When a group of future English as a Second Language teachers used mobile devices and another group used laptops, the results regarding their preferences were mixed (Kim, Rueckert, Kim, & Seo, 2013). They did not like to use their personal devices for everything, but rather enjoyed using them when the device made a task more user-friendly for them. For example, students would read responses posted by other students on a mobile device, or tablet, but would then switch to a laptop to type their responses. They found it easier to type on a laptop and use the discussion board. The mobile device group found it easier to interact when using mobile devices if they used apps designed for the social tool they were using, such as VoiceThread.

Kim, et al. (2013) affirmed that participation on VoiceThread was more frequent with the mobile group than the laptop group. When using a mobile device, learners prefer to use tools that they feel work well with that device, such as apps or YouTube. However, the same applies to laptops. When participating on discussion boards, students would choose laptops because typing was more efficient. Students mentioned a few limitations of mobile devices, like phones and tablets: the screen was small, it was difficult to type, and they felt accessing the discussion boards on a mobile device was difficult. Clearly, this is not a one-size-fits-all type of situation. Digital preferences will vary based upon individual taste and task. Asking

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learners what they prefer is probably a good strategy.

**The Option for Independence and Choice.** Providing opportunities for choice and independence also influence learner perceptions of a blended language-learning environment. Sometimes it is not possible to offer a device choice. In a situation where the device is predetermined, there are other ways to foster choice and independence. For example, in a study involving high school students unable to pass their university English as a Second Language entrance exam, students were limited to using the iPad for coursework (Gitsaki & Robby, 2014). However, they could use whichever apps they wanted to meet the learning goals in specific assignments (Gitsaki & Robby, 2014). Students reported having a choice among available apps and ways they could show understanding, made using iPads more enjoyable. They also reported feeling more motivated to study and manage their time on their own when using an iPad to participate in a blended course. This is a limited finding as there was no comparison group and no elaboration as to its cause. It is unclear why students felt this way.

Another way to foster independence and choice is to allow students to explore content in a way that makes sense to them (Alasraj & Alharbi, 2014). Students do not remain dependent on the instructor for guidance; they expect to be supported as they go on independent learning journeys (Sun & Qiu, 2017). When learners can interact with material at their own pace and on their own time, they report feeling better prepared and more independent (Wu, Hsieh, & Yang, 2017). Learners find it favorable when allowed to engage voluntarily with challenging tasks (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). Allowing them to choose among activities, explore topics of interest on their own, or to allow them to choose which tools to use to meet their goals can allow for this independence.



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**Comfort Level with Devices, Tools, and Blended Learning.** Student perceptions of blended learning can also be influenced by the comfort level students have with the devices, the tools available, or the blended environment itself (Challob, et al., 2016; Ferguson, 2016; Kim, et al., 2013; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). Sometimes, students feel that a device can add a layer of confusion if they are not familiar with it beforehand (Challob, et al., 2016). Other times, when the device being used for educational purposes is the same one owned and used in their daily lives, students reported being comfortable using the device (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). However, another study (Karabulurt, et al., 2012) found if students use a specific device in their daily lives it “does not automatically make them successful language learners who know how to effectively use technology for educational purposes” (p. 357). Students can learn how to use devices for educational purposes over time. The key seems to be providing time for adjustment and learning. The less experience and exposure they have to a device, the less comfortable learners find themselves with the device. The more frequently students are asked to use devices, the more comfortable they became over time with using those devices (Kim, et al., 2013).

Students can have different comfort levels with the tools, not just devices, being used in a blended environment. The more often a student uses a tool, the more comfortable the student reports being with the tool. In a study by Goertler, et al. (2012) the tool that students were most confident with was using a computer keyboard. They felt strongly that they knew how to type language-specific characters on the keyboard. They used keyboards often and knew how to access the special characters. The less comfortable students feel, the less they use the tool. Learners may give up if a tool creates a perceived barrier. If a tool makes resources more accessible, learners tend to feel positive toward it. Taking time to show

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students how to use the tool and giving them opportunity to use it, could improve their opinion and make the tool seem more accessible (Karabulut, et al., 2012).

Comfort levels of students with a blended environment are also related to time. The more experience a learner has had with taking blended classes, the more positively the learner perceived the blended environment. (Gascoigne & Parnel, 2014). As students gain experience using a blended environment their anxiety decreases regarding writing and speaking in blended environments (Challob, et al., 2016; Parra, 2016). The more a learner uses a device, tool, or blended environment, the more comfortable they become.

**Opportunities for Feedback.** Opportunities for feedback impact how students view blended learning. Learners appreciate feedback that is frequent, immediate, and personalized (Challob, et al., 2016; Jochum, 2011; Lee & Wallace, 2018; Moon, Wold, & Francom, 2016; Naqvi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2016; Yang, et al., 2014). Feedback occurring frequently during the writing process helped students be less anxious about writing in general (Challob, et al., 2016). They became accustomed to feedback and felt it was helpful. There are also ways to provide immediate feedback, particularly about comprehension and informational understanding. Both Moon, et al. (2016) and Naqvi and Al-Mahrooqi (2016) found that students reported immediate feedback from e-activities and instructional apps that provided comprehension questions for listening and reading were helpful. (Yang, et al., 2014). Other observations students expressed concerning feedback is that there is *more of it* when the class is blended (Lee & Wallace, 2018). Online, students enjoy having their names used in responses and for the feedback to indicate that the person giving the feedback knows them (Jochum, 2011).

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**Learner Expectations.** When learner expectations matched what students felt they experienced in a blended environment, their overall views were more positive towards blended learning. What learners expected in their learning activities did not always match the reality of their experiences. Some students who had never taken a blended class viewed it as an option that would require less work and time invested (Blake, et al., 2008). When learners experienced a blended environment that required more work or time investment than anticipated, they cited time and workload as a major complaint when surveyed after the course (Lee & Wallace, 2018). The more experience a learner had with the environment, the more accurately their expectation tended to align with what they experienced. Not all learners viewed blended learning positively, even if their expectations aligned with what happened. Some students do not enjoy blended courses and “not all students may benefit from such a course format” (Goertler, et al., 2012, p. 316).

Students also expect to have the opportunity to practice the same skills and knowledge that they will be held accountable for understanding (Jochum, 2011; Karabulut, et al., 2012). In situations where learners notice their own improvement over time, for example with writing, they are more willing to participate in future writing activities and find giving and receiving feedback to be useful (Jochum, 2011). Students did not react favorably when asked to do writing outside of class in a blended environment in a study of intermediate, French students (Karabulut, et al., 2012). The problem for students was that they spent the majority of their time in class watching French movies, or listening to the teacher speak French. A mismatch between student expectations and teacher communication caused an issue in this study. The teacher believed that providing listening opportunities would help build background for them regarding the movies and projects they were asked to complete.

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The students did not make this connection. The majority of students entering the course wanted to improve their speaking abilities--specifically to have conversations, and were reportedly disappointed that the opportunity to practice speaking was not an aspect of the course.

### **Engaging Second Language Learners in a Blended Learning Environment**

What conditions of a blended environment make learner engagement likely? What creates the most optimal situation for engagement? As with perception, we must first define engagement. The studies reviewed referred to engagement as participation. Participation was defined as the rate of participation or actively completing tasks (Aycicek, 2018; Dell'Aria, et al., 2013; Hampels & Pleines, 2013; Wu, Hsieh, & Yang, 2017; Young, 2008). Conditions that can impact engagement include: 1) the amount of and type of social interaction; 2) creating a sense of personal responsibility for the learner; 3) having a meaningful context within which learning is taking place; and 4) other factors

**Social Interaction.** One condition that fosters engagement is providing learners with opportunities for social interaction within the blended environment--during face-to-face time or online. Social interaction in a blended language learning environment can be used to engage students in both the K-12 environment and the post-secondary environment. Six studies mention using social interaction to engage students (Challob, et al., 2016; Dell'Aria, et al., 2013; Grgurovic, 2011; Luo, 2013; Pellerin & Soler Montes, 2012; Young, 2008). Luo (2013) highlighted the finding that social interaction can be leveraged to build a sense of community within a blended environment while the rest focused on the academic aspects of the blended environment. Another, Jochum (2011), addresses the concern that a blended environment limits interaction. Jochum found that, in general, a blended environment

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requires that all students share their insights on learning, usually within an online format. This means more voices are heard than in a typical face-to-face classroom; and therefore, there is evidence that more people are engaged with the material.

A blended environment can offer interaction that takes place outside of face-to-face time. Sometimes these situations can offer unique opportunities. One post-secondary study used the virtual classroom, Second Life, to foster interaction between native speakers and students. Second Life is a social environment where learners interact in virtual reality. Since this was accessible to all students, and was in a one-on-one situation, student participation reflected skill, more so than personality traits such as extroversion in the traditional classroom (Dell'Aria, et al., 2013). Engagement was described as high for learners using the Second Life environment. In another study involving an upper -intermediate, German course, students interacted with a tutor who provided individual feedback online. Students took advantage of using this resource and received more individual feedback/interaction from the tutor than in a traditional face-to-face class (Hampels & Pleines, 2013)

Conversely, a blended environment can offer opportunities to interact *outside* of face-to-face time so that students can be more engaged individually *during* face-to-face time. Grgurovic (2011) found that students in a post-secondary, blended setting stayed engaged individually with writing during face-to-face time in a writing lab. Students discussed the writing process and ideas online, prior to coming to class. During lab time, students would ask specific questions of the teachers, if needed, and stayed on task. This was a case study and did not have a comparison group, but engagement was found to be high.

A study, taking place in a Malaysian high school, found similar results (Challob, et al., 2016). Students participated in an online writing process. They used face-to-face time to

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write. Students were engaged and writing during the face-to-face time as they had already had the opportunity to discuss and clarify ideas prior to class. Wu, et al. (2017) also found that preparing ahead of time, though in this case to discuss learning, prior to face-to-face time, led to more active engagement through participation during face-to-face time. Lee and Wallace (2018) noticed that the blended group asked 12-15 more questions per class than the comparison group. This could be due to online interaction prior to face-to-face time and preparedness. Social interaction can foster engagement whether it happens in the online or face-to-face component of blended learning.

**Personal Responsibility.** Preparing ahead of time is one way to create a situation for interaction and engagement, but also puts more responsibility on the students for their learning (Lee & Wallace, 2018; Wu, et al., 2017). Being personally responsible for learning, fosters students' engagement; they can hold themselves accountable. They are not dependent on the teacher as the only one holding them accountable. (Aycicek & Yanpar Yelkin, 2018). Learners are expected to seek help when they are misunderstanding something or need assistance (Challob, et al., 2016; Grgurovic, 2011). In a seventh-grade secondary school in Turkey, learners were expected to complete online activities on their own and seek help when they were unsure of themselves. The blended environment was used to post videos. These videos were interactive and let the students take note of what they still did not understand. Alasraj and Alharbi (2014) found that when students were free to seek other sources, rather than limited to the ones provided by the teacher, they were very motivated to find other sources on topics of learning. They willingly engaged in seeking out further learning. Learner engagement was fostered outside of class time when students were held responsible for their learning and provided the tools with which to do complete the work

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successfully.

**Meaningful Context.** Another condition that affects learner engagement is the presence of a meaningful context. What makes a meaningful context? Kirkgoz (2011) mentioned a study by Loumpourdi (2005) where a meaningful context for content, coupled with a purpose, aids acquisition as outlined in the introduction (Van Patten, 2017). So, for a context to be meaningful in terms of communication, there needs to be a point to the interaction that goes beyond just studying a language. To engage learners, these contexts can be compelling and interesting (Krashen, 1998), or they can be about something all of the learners have a vested interest in, such as improving writing (Challob, et al., 2016; Jochum, 2011). For example, students could learn about topics (Hampels & Pleines, 2013) or critical thinking skills (Yang, et al., 2014) using the language they are attempting to learn at the same time. An instructor can initially ‘hook’ learners with a topic, or piece of content, and give them a goal to reach. On the way to their goal, they, hopefully, notice their own improvement or are provided feedback to demonstrate evidence of improvement. This motivates them to put more time and effort into participating (Young, 2008) as we learned in the perception section.

For engagement to reach its highest potential, access to an environment providing the opportunity to communicate in a context meaningful to learners is needed in addition to the opportunities for social interaction and personal responsibility Fisher, et al., (2012) is an example of what happens when learning lacks a context. Japanese high school students were involved in a crossover design using the following options: a book, a mobile phone e-book with an online dictionary, and a phone e-book with other types of vocabulary software supports. After being grouped based on pre-tests, students participated with one option for

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two weeks, before cycling through the other two. No growth in vocabulary was indicated by the results. The problem arose when students were given the task. They were asked to complete the reading outside of class in their very limited free time. They did not discuss, use, or interpret the books in class. The books they were asked to read were not based on their interest; and learners saw no point in reading them as it had no bearing on their grade, and was not connected to class. There was no link to a learning context for them. Learners did not bother to read the books in the majority of cases.

To promote the most engagement, it is important to keep in mind that learners will participate and stay engaged even in uncomfortable situations if the context is meaningful and goal oriented. This was indicated by Moon, et al. (2016) regarding reading and listening, and by Challob, et al. (2016) and Parra (2016) regarding undergoing uncomfortable activities like speaking and writing. Students are more engaged when they can communicate with each other rather than memorize words or rules.

**Other Factors.** There are a few other factors that influence learner engagement worth mentioning, but the findings were not frequent enough to denote their own section. The first is explicitly teaching how to use tools in an educational context when needed (Naqvi and Al-Mahrooqi, 2016). Also indicated by this same study, was that explicit instruction regarding time management and teamwork for students in a blended environment was beneficial. These two choices seem logical if taken together with other topics discussed. Kim, et al. (2013) found that learners would give up if they perceived a barrier. Not understanding tools or how to manage working in a blended language environment would be a barrier. If learners give up, they are not going to be engaged.



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### **Second Language Learner Outcomes in a Blended Learning Environment**

For convenience, perceptions, engagement, and outcomes are discussed separately. However, studies often end up looking at some combination of these three concepts. One example is Chuang, Weng, and Chen (2018). The higher the beliefs toward language learning, the higher growth students experienced between tests given (Chuang, et al., 2018). Gitskai and Robby (2014) mention that the students, who engaged with a variety of activities, saw the most gains in outcomes. No researcher has expressed causation outright, only that each concept influences the other two. The reviewer wishes to acknowledge this connection.

What learner outcomes occur in a blended language-learning environment? Do they differ from learner outcomes in a more traditional language-learning environment? For the purposes of this review, ‘outcome’ will refer to achievement scores that are either compared in a pre-post test fashion, between a traditional and blended group of learners, or scores that are from a group in a case study.

#### **Overall Outcomes (Combination of Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking).**

A few studies found no significant difference between outcomes in a blended versus a traditional course organization (Blake, Wilson, Cetto, & Pardo-Ballester, 2008; Gascoigne & Parnel, 2014; Godev, 2014; Yang, Yin, & Wang, 2018; Young, 2008). Other studies found overall significantly more positive achievement for blended groups (Alasraj & Alharbi, 2014; Isiguzel, 2014).

For Lee and Wallace (2018) the overall course grades, major tests, and the midterm exam scores were not significantly different in an intermediate level English course between a blended and non-blended group. However, the final exam results were significantly higher for the blended group. They attributed this to technological issues with the online version of

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the course during the first half of their study. For Young (2008), technological difficulties converting to a blended environment contributed to students performing differently on the midterm exam versus the final exam. The researcher indicated that once the technology issues had been resolved, “the positive effects of online learning began to emerge” (Young, 2008, p. 173). Blended learners outperformed their comparison group counterparts on the final exam.

In a study by Moreno-Lopez, et al. (2017), student ability with all four language skills increased as well. In groups where students practiced a lot with listening and speaking, students perceived those skills to increase more, even though the results do not show this. Moreno-Lopez, et al. cited the limitation that in both the traditional and blended environments, students were expected to use Spanish to communicate about class topics and the classes were conducted in Spanish. Was the high use of Spanish in this program the key variable, or was it the setting, traditional or blended? They were unsure.

**Oral Proficiency.** Some studies concentrated specifically on oral proficiency within a blended context. Oral proficiency can include what most of us think of as speaking ability (Blake, et al., 2008; Kirkgoz, 2011; Wu, et al., 2017) or, in some cases, only a part of that proficiency such as pronunciation (Dell’Aria, et al., 2013). The majority of the studies discussed refer to overall speaking ability, not only pronunciation.

One study that looked at oral proficiency in blended environments that included face-to-face time, and distance learning that did not meet in-person in a first-year course (Blake, et al., 2008). It was unclear if the distance-learning group ever met face-to-face or in an online environment. Students’ oral proficiency was shown through the results of a twenty-minute phone assessment. They found no difference in oral proficiency results among blended,

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distance, and traditional face-to-face environments. The study was done in an attempt to address the researchers' concerns that students using a blended environment would be behind those from a traditional- learning background regarding oral proficiency. This did not turn out to be the case.

Other studies found oral proficiency to increase significantly in blended situations. For Kirkgoz (2011), speaking significantly improved for the students taking a blended version of the course. Students in the blended group had a richer range of vocabulary and more varied intonation than the non-blended groups previously taught. Two other studies Gitaski & Robby (2014) and Yang, et al. (2018) also found that speaking increased significantly for the blended group. Another study (Dell'Aria, et al., 2013), focusing on intonation and pronunciation, found that while both groups saw gains, the blended group had overall higher pronunciation scores than the traditional group.

Wu, et al. (2017) exposed the same two groups of learners to both a blended and a traditional experience. It took place in a high-intermediate English course and focused on oral proficiency (Wu, et al., 2017). Each group experienced each condition, a blended classroom and a lecture-based classroom, for eight weeks. When the explanation of grammar rules and introduction of reading passages occurred outside of class in the blended versions, students were able to talk about content more during face-to-face time than in the comparison group. The traditional group was first exposed to the material in the face-to-face classroom. This limited the time they had to speak in the face-to-face environment. Both groups experienced gains in oral proficiency, but the blended group outperformed the lecture-based group on post-tests, significantly.

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**Reading.** Reading and comprehension outcomes were isolated during four studies (Alasraj & Alharbi, 2014; Moon, et al., 2016; Yang, et al., 2014; Yang, et al., 2018). One, (Yang, et al., 2018), found no significant difference in reading outcomes for a blended or a non-blended environment. Moon, et al. (2016) had reading comprehension as a central focus and found that using technology to show, build, and express comprehension led to improved comprehension outcomes. Both Alasraj and Alharbi (2014) and Yang, et al. (2014) found reading outcomes to be significantly better in a blended environment.

**Writing.** A few studies found that writing improved significantly within a blended environment (Alasraj & Alharbi, 2014; Challob, et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2014). These three studies had in common that students were tasked with writing a lot in class and on discussion boards. Yang, et al. (2018) found no significant difference for writing between blended and non-blended courses. This surprised Yang, et al. (2018) as the blended courses participated in a discussion board and, as a result, wrote more than the comparison group. Writing performance seems to have similar or better outcomes within a blended environment as it does in a traditional one.

**Listening.** Few studies separated out listening as a skill. Listening was considered part of overall proficiency within studies discussed earlier. Two studies separated out listening outcomes (Yang, et al., 2018; Young, 2008). The results of both studies indicated that there were no significant differences between the experimental and blended groups. Young (2008) made the effort to point out that listening as a skill and opportunities for practice had an equal focus in both the blended environment and the traditional one. So, for Young (2008), it was not surprising that there was no difference in outcomes for listening between the traditional and blended environments.

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### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Conclusions**

Many of us have memories of taking a second language class during our education. While individual experiences vary, many students remember memorizing vocabulary and doing grammar exercises. The more recent stance is that second language learning has elements in common with how we learn our first language (Krashen, 1998; Van Patten, 2017). Students tend to internalize rules and pick up on patterns to mimic, through listening and reading proper examples that are comprehensible. Practicing skills like pronunciation can be advantageous, but should not constitute the majority of a course. Leveraging technology to aid this process could be effective and efficient. Blended learning is one way to use technology that changes how students and teachers interact and learn. Can blended learning and second language learning ideas be used in tandem to provide an engaging experience that yields positive outcomes?

**Second Language Learners' Perceptions of Blended Learning.** What are the perceptions of second language learners regarding blended learning? Remember that perceptions are identified as what students think or believe about a blended learning environment. Discussed were the opinions, attitudes, expectations, and preferences of students toward blended and second language learning. The following conditions were discussed as influencing student perceptions: 1) novelty, 2) the age and language level of the learner, 3) the device used, 4) the option for independence and choice, 5) comfort level with blended learning, devices, and tools, 6) opportunities for feedback, and 7) learner expectations.

Students' perceptions, good or bad, are based upon their feeling of comfort with their

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devices, tools, and overall blended learning environment. Comfort doesn't mean learning without challenge. It means that learners feel confident in working in a blended learning environment. What makes learners comfortable? By attending to the conditions that affect their perceptions of a blended learning environment, we can help them to cope and function comfortably within such an environment. Too much or too little independence or feedback could result in a learner feeling overwhelmed or neglected. Either of those states does not indicate a high level of comfort.

Novelty would be a good example of a condition that needs to be managed. Novelty can interest learners and be a positive experience (Ferguson, 2016; Tingir, et al., 2017). At first, the tool can be new and exciting. As students use a tool more, they become more comfortable with it (Goertler, et al., 2012). As students become more comfortable with a tool, the more the novelty can wear off. Finding an optimal way to create comfort, but still offering up engaging tools to create a novelty effect, is a delicate balancing act.

### **Engaging Second Language Learners in a Blended Learning Environment.**

Engaging students and getting them to participate in a blended environment has commonalities with what the literature highlighted as best practice within a face-to-face traditional classroom. Best pedagogical practices tend to be best for most educational environments (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Rice, 2012; Romeo, Bernhardt, Miano, & Leffell, 2017). Conditions discussed that influenced learner engagement were: 1) the amount of and type of social interaction; 2) creating a sense of personal responsibility for the learner; 3) having a meaningful context within which learning is taking place; and 4) other factors.

Social interaction can influence learners' engagement as well. Only one study referenced that social interaction is important to build a sense of community (Luo, 2013).

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Most concentrated on an academic purpose. This seems counterintuitive when the reviewer thinks about how many icebreakers she has done in her life! However, it is engaging for students to interact outside of class (Grgurovic, 2011); and, though most did not directly state it, this interaction could possibly add to a sense of a learner community. In one study, as students participated more and more on the online discussion board, they began to refer to each other by name without prompting from the instructor (Jochum, 2011)--providing evidence that they were feeling a part of a learner community. The blended environment also seems to produce more evidence that students are engaging than in traditional settings. Students have been shown(?) to be less influenced by introvert or extrovert tendencies than in a traditional classroom (Dell'Aria, et al., 2013). Even when time is spent working individually during face-to-face time, learners still will make the time to interact online (Challob, et al., 2016).

A few of the studies indicated that putting more responsibility on students themselves is appealing to them (Alasraj & Alharbi, 2014; Gitsaki & Robby, 2014; Sun & Qiu, 2017). A sense of responsibility can be fostered by allowing them to choose among activities, explore topics of interest on their own, or to allow them to choose which tools to use to meet their goals. The feedback learners receive can also play a part in their taking responsibility for their learning. When online formative assessments let students know how well they understand topics (Challob, 2016; Grgurovic, 2011), the students can then be held accountable for seeking clarification. Attentiveness to their learning progress can engage students in the process of learning.

Another part of the academic environment is to provide a meaningful context for learning. What does it mean to learn a language? People want to communicate about things

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they care about with each other while learning a language (Van Patten, 2017). Providing a context within which a goal can be reached can create this type of setting. At first, writing and speaking can seem very nerve-racking for students, but as they do it more, they get better and feel like they are improving (Challob, et al., 2016; Gascoigne & Parnel, 2014; Parra, 2016). How was this done? Well, the students understood that the goal was to improve their writing. They were given interesting topics to write about and a safe environment to provide feedback to each other. As learners wrote more and more within this context, they noticed their own improvement and realized they were meeting their goal! They identified writing as a very uncomfortable activity, but this sense of dread decreased over time (Challob, et al., Parra, 2016).

**Second Language Learner Outcomes in a Blended Learning Environment.** Aside from learner perceptions and the activities they engage with more willingly, learning outcomes for second language learning in a blended environment were of interest to the reviewer. Outcomes in this review are defined as achievement scores. Results were discussed in relation to listening, reading, writing, and speaking or in overall language proficiency. There seem to be mixed results as to the outcome benefits for learners. Sometimes, no significant difference was found between a blended versus traditional outcomes (Blake, et al., 2008; Gascoigne & Parnel, 2014; Godev, 2014; Yang et al., 2018). Others found improved learning outcomes when language was learned using a blended environment (Alasraj & Alharbi, 2014; Isiguzel, 2014; Kirkgoz, 2011; Moreno-Lopez, et al., 2017; Wu, et al., 2017; Yang, et al., 2014; Young, 2008). I arrived at the conclusion that well designed blended second language learning can create equal or better outcomes than the traditional learning model.



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### Recommendations

**Future Research.** While conducting this review, it became clear that much of the research investigating teaching second language acquisition in a blended learning environment has been conducted primarily at the post-secondary level. It is recommended that more research be conducted at the secondary level or even the K-12 level. Using the blended environment in a secondary situation may offer limitations or new opportunities.

Only five of the studies (Blake, et al., 2008; Goertler, et al., 2012; Godev, 2014; Romeo, et al., 2017; Yang, et al, 2018) focused on novice- level, language learners. It is recommended that more studies be done at the novice level so more ideas and strategies can be found to assist early language learners in a blended environment. If students have limited language proficiency, it would be more difficult to engage them online as their reading and writing skills are limited. Most advice and ideas were in regard to intermediate or higher language learners.

One major concern that arose when conducting this review was regarding perceptions of students about blended learning and second language learning. Some studies used surveys and questionnaires (Ferguson, 2016; Tingir, et al., 2017). This is a recognized way of obtaining data. What seems to be lacking are specifics as to *why* learners feel certain ways. Ferguson (2016) used a Likert scale with 6-8 grade students. While it did have a section to elaborate, due to the scope of the study, individual interviews were not done. Tingir, et al. (2017) was a meta-analysis and concentrated on trends of general perceptions with regard to gender and age rather than detailing how and why students felt certain ways. Focusing on a few of these perceptions and investigating them in depth may help enlighten our goal of understanding student perceptions on a deeper level.

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**Pedagogical Considerations/Practice.** Engaging students in a blended environment to learn a second language seems to also align with what we commonly think of as best practice in a traditional classroom. Interaction was a general theme among the activities used to engage learners. It is recommended that learners have access to a variety of activities that allow them to interact with each other about meaningful topics. Within these activities, learners can create a sense of community and engage in a context that fosters independence from the teacher. Feedback is also part of this interaction. Teachers need to provide ample feedback, often in at least two forms. The first is individual and immediate. One can do this using many online tools such as Socrative, Quizizz, EdPuzzle, or Google Forms, to list a few. The other can happen by putting comments on papers, having writing conferences, or individual interviews. Feedback allows the learner to evaluate their progress and make decisions to act accordingly. Fostering this sort of independence is important to the blended learning experience.

In order to create a meaningful context for language learning, students need to interact in the language they are learning, about topics and content they care about, to meet a goal. The more students do something, the more they become accustomed to and comfortable with it. Offering students time to practice with listening, reading, writing, and speaking will increase their confidence and willingness to do those activities more. In an online environment, using a discussion board to discuss content and topics would be an optimal way to practice writing. Students would be reading for meaning and writing to get an idea across. The focus would not be on grammar and usage as much as the content of the message. As learners increase with skill, they could be held more accountable for their level of usage.

Since blended language learning has the capacity to yield equal or better results to

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traditional learning, it is recommended that second language learning and blended learning be used to complement each other. By using both environments, there are more options to engage the learner through social interaction, involve he/she in tracking their own progress towards goals, and includes a space for introverts and extroverts to be heard. Keeping in mind the learner perceptions can help an instructor maximize the learner experience. If students clearly understand what the course will entail--their expectations could be more accurate, etc.

In conclusion, blended learning and second language learning can be used together to engage learners in a way that outcomes can equal or exceed the success found in the traditional classroom. There are many aspects to keep in mind as we use blended and second language learning to complement each other. If an instructor attends to these aspects, they will be able to create a successful blended learning environment in which students will experience language-learning gains.

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