Practice and Exploration of Blended Teaching in Private Colleges - A Case Study of Integrated Business English Course

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Abstract: *Under the background of COVID-19 and informatization, traditional educational patterns have undergone earth-shaking changes. Blended teaching has become the trend of future education technology. Based on the author's practice of blended teaching in the course of integrated business English, the paper discusses the teaching predicament and brings forward the countermeasures and suggestions for the curriculum reform from the perspectives of the environmental optimization of teaching system, perfection of safeguard mechanism, and improvement in teachers' teaching and students' learning ability. It provides empirical evidence for the future research of this subject in academia.*

Keywords: *Private Colleges, Blended Teaching Pattern, Predicament and Countermeasures, Integrated Business English Course*

1. Introduction

Under the background of COVID-19 and informatization, the traditional educational patterns have undergone earth-shaking changes. With the growing convergence of information technology and education technology, blended teaching has achieved great development. Structurally blended teaching integrates a variety of media tools and education means. It is "the combination of advantages of network learning and traditional teaching, and the trend of future education technology" [1]. In recent years, it has successfully attracted more and more attention and research from educators and researchers. Based on the author's blended teaching practice of Integrated Business English, this paper primarily discusses the teaching predicament and proposes countermeasures and suggestions to improve the quality of blended teaching with the purpose of providing empirical data for future academic research on this topic.

2. Concept and Research Status of Blended Teaching Mode

Blended teaching is a teaching mode formed after the emergence of blended learning theory. In the field of educational technology research, blended teaching and blended learning are two very similar but different concepts. The subject of blended learning is the learner, while the subject of blended teaching is the teacher. At present, there is no unified definition of blended teaching at home and abroad. The definition which is generally accepted by teachers and scholars in China was put forward by Professor He Kekang in 2004, who defines "blended learning is to combine traditional learning pattern with web-based learning, which not only allows teachers to play the leading role of inspiration, guidance and monitoring in the teaching process, but also allows students to play the subjective role of initiative, enthusiasm and creativity [2]."

Internationally, blended teaching first appeared at the end of last century and research mainly centered on theoretical basis, application model, learning effect and other aspects, such as Barnum (2002) [3] and Philip Barker (2008) [4]. In comparison, the research of Chinese scholars is mainly focused on the field of higher education. With the passage of time, the emphasis of study has gradually shifted from the conception, nature, development and related theories of blended teaching to resource exploitation and platform construction. For now, the key research issues are the pattern design and

application practice of mixed teaching. In 2012, Jiang Ling made a detailed functional design of Microsoft Live platform and carried out teaching practice linking with the course contents. In 2017, Lv Chuanxu incorporated the mixed teaching mode into the course of ideological and political theory in universities [5].

3. Practice of Blended Teaching of Integrated Business English

3.1. Analysis of Students' Characteristics

The research object of this thesis is the first-year undergraduates of Business English major in private colleges. Compared with those in public universities, students in such colleges have significant differences. They haven't a solid foundation of English, lacking motivation in autonomous learning and showing low interest and enthusiasm in learning. Additionally, they couldn't learn scientifically and develop good learning habits, thereby reducing their learning efficiency. Learning motivation mainly includes passing all kinds of relevant English and computer exams, obtaining vocational qualification certificates and graduation certificates, and developing technical skills. However, they are better at using the Internet to communicate with others, quickly learn and accept new things. They have a wide range of interests and hobbies and are versatile. They have strong ability of social activities. They pursue individual expression and prefer relaxed and lively teaching methods.

3.2. Practice of Blended Teaching of Integrated Business English

3.2.1. Basic Course Information

Table 1: Basic course information

Textbook	Intelligent Business (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press)
Scheduling	18 teaching weeks per semester, 6 credit hours per week, 12 credit hours per unit
Teaching goals	Knowledge: basic language knowledge, professional business knowledge, business culture knowledge Skills: English application ability, business practice ability, cross-cultural communication ability, critical thinking and innovation ability, independent learning ability Quality: cultivating compound and applied talents with international vision, humanistic quality, business quality, cross-cultural quality and professional quality.
Online platforms	Superstar and WeChat
Design philosophy	Offline teaching-based, online self-learning-supplemented, double-line stretching

3.2.2. Preparation for Lessons

At this stage, the teacher will prepare for traditional classroom teaching and online self-learning respectively.

Course preparation contents for traditional classroom teaching include

a)Collect, sort out, screen and integrate teaching materials, suggested readings, pictures, audios and videos;

b) Making teaching plans and teaching calendars;

c) Writing syllabus;

d) Other routine preparations, such as making PPTs, etc.

Course preparation contents for online self-learning include

a) Form a class group. Before classes officially start, the teacher will organize students to set up a class group on the Superstar and WeChat respectively, so that the teacher can release notices, upload materials, answer questions, and communicate with students timely.

b) Upload teaching resources. Superstar provides a variety of functional module areas, which correspond to different teaching materials. For example, in the "material" module, teachers can upload

course description, text recordings, supporting listening materials, suggested readings, etc. In the "lesson plan" module, teachers can upload the lesson plan, syllabus and teaching calendar of the course.

c) Build online courses. Following the given modules and instructions of the platform, the teacher can create courses by chapters and sections. Each chapter of Integrated Business English will be divided into two sections. The first section is used to briefly state the teaching objectives goals of the unit, the index of teaching resources and network links. The second section is used to elaborate the teaching contents of the unit, generally including: key vocabularies, business terms, special grammar, self-made courseware, self-recorded teaching short videos, ready-made online videos, answers to parts of the exercises, and so on. In addition, under various functional modules, such as "homework" and "examination" modules, resource libraries are built according to teaching units and established formats.

d) Construct an evaluation and feedback system. With the statistical function of Superstar, the teacher can select the evaluated items and set corresponding weights according to their own needs, and establish a proprietary evaluation and feedback system.

3.2.3. Teaching

The comparison of teaching items between traditional classroom teaching and online autonomous learning is shown in table.

Table 2: Key teaching items

Items compared	Traditional classroom teaching	Online self-learning
Way of Teaching	Class-based teaching	Students' self-regulated learning
Teacher's role	Knowledge giver	Knowledge leader
Teaching goals	(1) Understand and master core business vocabulary; (2) All-round training of basic English skills, esp. focusing on oral expression, reading, translation and writing skills; (3) Strengthen the ability to use grammar practically; (4) Master basic theories and knowledge related to international business; (5) Cultivate cross-cultural awareness.	(1) Consolidate the basic English skills, esp. focusing on the training of students' listening skills; (2) Cultivate students' ability of autonomous exploration; (3) Understand the rules of international business practice; (4) Strengthen English application ability, business practice ability, cross-cultural ability, thinking and innovation ability.
Teaching approaches	Group cooperation-based methods are mainly adopted, such as "didactic teaching", group presentation, classroom discussion, role-play, group fun dubbing, case study, vocabulary competition, etc.	Independent learning-oriented approaches are mainly adopted, such as task point setting, online questioning, online forum, etc.

Traditional classroom activities and teaching contents are as follows.

According to the teaching process:

▪ Reading or dubbing. Around five minutes before each class, students (about two students/groups for each class) take turns to read or dub. The purpose is to correct or improve students' pronunciation and intonation.

▪ Warm-up. Design two or three questions related to the business theme of each unit and guide students to think, discuss, and then derive relevant business vocabulary, terms or basic theories. The purpose is to let students have a preliminary understanding of relevant business knowledge and serve as a trigger for the learning of the subsequent business knowledge.

▪ Knowledge elaboration. This is the key and difficult parts of each class, including the elaboration of both business knowledge and English knowledge. In terms of business knowledge, the teacher will explain knowledge and vocabulary in a detailed, systematic and easy-to-understand way by using methods such as "combining theory with practice" and "case analysis". In terms of English knowledge, the teacher mainly uses "discourse analysis" to explain texts and analyze their structures, and follow the principle of "practice more and teach less" to consolidate and improve grammar skills, reading comprehension and translation skills.

▪ Classroom practice. In order to strengthen the foundation of knowledge and real-world skills, students can practice with various kinds of question-types and special language training exercises in the textbook.

▪ Business culture introduction. Introduce the business culture of different countries to students by using MOOCs or online video resources, guide students to think about China's workplace culture, cultivate cross-cultural awareness and improve cross-cultural quality.

▪ Answering questions. The last five minutes of each class are left for students to ask questions. They can ask about the contents of the lesson, the learning methods, and the skills possibly used to overcome the difficulties in the learning process.

Online self-learning activities and contents are as follows.

According to the learning process:

▪ Release notices. Every Monday, the teacher will publish a notice on Superstar and WeChat about the learning objectives, tasks, methods and results of the week.

▪ Watch the courseware. Students accomplish the learning on their own by following the courseware provided by teachers.

▪ Watch instructional videos. There are two main categories of teaching videos. The first includes the ones recorded by the teachers themselves according to the teaching tasks, which generally last about 5-10 minutes. The second includes teachers' carefully chosen MOOCs and online video resources for students. The teachers generally set videos-watching as task points, requiring students not to speed the playback. The system will automatically record the students' viewing situation.

▪ Stretch problem-solving capabilities. For each unit, the teacher will upload at least one business case and design two or three interlinked tasks to guide students to reflect on the real problems and broaden their international business horizons. Students are required to post their own solutions on the discussion board, and can also comment on and give likes to the solutions posted by other students. The number of published discussions and comments will be recorded and counted automatically by the platform.

▪ Asking questions online. During the course of self-study, whenever students are stuck on any questions, they can turn to their teachers through Superstar and WeChat.

▪ Complete the exercises. After learning a knowledge point, students must complete the matching exercises prepared by the teacher in order to test the learning effect. Tutorial exercises are offered to students in the form of quizzes, the scores of which are counted towards their final grade by a certain percentage.

▪ Interactive feedback. Every month, according to the learning records on Superstar, the teacher will have a face-to-face conversation with the underachievers to help solve their difficulties or urge them to complete their learning tasks. They also upload outstanding student assignments and lists of the top five students of the month on the platforms to motivate students to learn from each other.

3.2.4. Monitoring and Evaluation

Table 3: Comparison of Post-teaching links

Items compared	Traditional classroom teaching	Online self-learning
Homework	Contents: translation and writing Submission approaches: Submit hard-copy assignments directly to the teacher Markers: the teachers	Contents: Grammar, listening and speaking (mainly in the form of self-recorded theme skits and reading & dubbing audio files) Submission approaches: Submit electronic-version assignments directly to the platform Markers: the teacher and platform marking system
Routine tests	Teachers organize students to take various tests through the mobile Superstar APP uniformly. The test contents include unit vocabulary test, unit comprehensive test, term vocabulary contest and mid-term exam, etc.	
The final test	Test format: Unified offline test Grade proportion: 60% of the final grade Test contents: (1) Assessment of students' mastery of knowledge; (2) Evaluation of teaching results. Evaluation subject: teachers	Test format: Online self-examination Grade proportion: 40% of the final grade Test contents: (1) Assessment of the process of students' independent learning; (2) Evaluation of the learning process. Evaluation subjects: platform, teachers, other students
Teaching quality tracking	Mid-term Teaching Evaluation organized by the school	"Questionnaire on Teaching Quality" on WeChat distributed by the teachers themselves

4. Problems and Dilemmas in Blended Teaching

4.1. Obstacles of Awareness

4.1.1. Obstacles of School Awareness

The online teaching of our school was an emergency measure to cope with the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 and guarantee the orderly teaching. After the epidemic was effectively controlled and the teaching was normalized, some teachers reflected and summarized the problems and experience of online teaching, and actively attempted to link online learning with classroom teaching to improve the effect of teaching and learning. However, the school does not give continuous attention, attach great importance to and provide support to blended teaching. Only a few public courses are allowed to adopt this pattern, and the other courses are still mainly offline classroom teaching. Therefore, for the time being, blended teaching of many subjects is simply the individual behavior of teachers without any school's support, which seriously hinders its development in our school.

4.1.2. Obstacles of Students' Awareness

Nowadays, mixed teaching is still in the exploratory stage in our school, and fresh to our students. Furthermore, teachers generally move the offline teaching activities in parallel to the online platform without any modification and innovation. Therefore, when the novelty of blended teaching wears off, students' enthusiasm for learning and initiatives are greatly reduced. They are unwilling to participate in and even resist.

4.1.3. Obstacle of Collaboration Awareness

The smooth implementation of mixed teaching involves many participants and requires the cooperation of different working groups. For example, the government plays the role of direction guidance and policy orientation; colleges and universities play the main role of teaching reform and implementation; enterprises play the role of platform support and resource services; and teachers and students play the role of masters of teaching and learning. If any party cannot cooperate well, it will lead to the failure of mixed teaching practice. Take all kinds of online platforms as examples. They are managed by different organizations or enterprises, and there is little or no communication between the management entities. Such disordered and disorganized state brings difficulties to the orderly and unified implementation of mixed teaching. It cannot effectively integrate various elements, thus setting obstacles for mixed teaching and failing to fully realize its value. However, removal of such obstacles is beyond teachers' capabilities.

4.2. Structural and Policy Obstacles

4.2.1. Lack of Unified Construction Standard for Mixed Teaching

For the time being, there is no unified construction standard for mixed teaching in schools or even in China. As a consequence, the lack of systematic, comprehensive and reasonable design and arrangement for teaching links, contents and evaluation can easily lead to teachers' confusion, randomness, personalization, and low efficiency in teaching.

4.2.2. Inconducive Teacher Assessment System

In most schools, the two most important indicators for evaluating teachers are scientific work and basic teaching workload. In order to successfully pass the assessment, teachers devote most of their time and energy to scientific research and completion of the rated teaching workload. Nevertheless, undertaking mixed teaching inevitably requires a substantial commitment of time and efforts from teachers to the transformation of thinking and competence and to the research and solution of teaching problems. Consequently, lack of sufficient time and energy is one of the main obstacles for teachers to carry out mixed teaching continuously.

4.2.3. Lack of Mixed Teaching Support and Incentive Policies

At the moment the teachers engaged in mixed teaching in our school are all working alone without forming a teaching team. The school hasn't yet formulated relevant policies to support and encourage the organization and implementation of mixed teaching. For the continuous and smooth development of mixed teaching, the policy orientation, resource inclination and recognition of teaching and research achievements are of vital importance. If only relying on teachers to carry out reform and exploration on their own, the school is like nobody's business and indifferent to it, the teaching pattern will be difficult

to sustain.

4.3. Technical Obstacles

4.3.1. Problematic Existing Online Platforms

After a period of mixed teaching, the author finds out that there are many technical problems and limitations in the platform of Superstar, which cannot support the development of mixed teaching well. The common ones are seen most often.

a) Incomplete functions for teaching and learning. For example, the question-types of exercises or exams are limited, hence teachers can only choose among the given types instead of selecting the most appropriate ones according to the characteristics of the course and teaching contents.

b) Low compatibility between Superstar and the other software. Because of it, teachers cannot directly import exercises or tests from existing databases, they must input then into the system word by word, which is a waste of time.

c) Less enjoyment in online learning. Due to the limitation of platform technology, online learning is not interesting enough to attract students' attention, and it is difficult for students to concentrate on online learning for a long time, resulting in poor learning effect.

d) Inadequate monitoring. Existing platform technologies do not monitor students' online learning enough. For instance, it can't tell if the student is really learning, or hanging up.

e) Solidified teaching evaluation and feedback system. Online teaching evaluation system cannot meet the requirements. The evaluation form is single, and the index is boxed and standardized. The teachers cannot design their own evaluation system upon demand. Besides, the platform is also prone to glitches, such as mistakes in marking homework and examination papers, failing to correctly grade and identify answers.

4.3.2. Low Teachers' Information Literacy

Mixed teaching has changed the classroom form and learning mode, which means that the requirements for teachers' teaching capabilities and skills have undergone fundamental changes. From the practice of mixed teaching, what teachers need to develop is mainly the abilities of design, implementation and evaluation of classroom teaching based on education and information technology. However, the information technology literacy of teachers is generally not high for the moment, which cannot satisfy the requirements of the new teaching mode. For example, self-made PPT courseware and teaching videos are of low quality, low professionalism and technology, and lack of teaching design. They are just translation of teaching material knowledge, not interactive and interesting, and cannot well catch students' attention. Improvement of these abilities requires purposeful and targeted learning and continuous follow-up by teachers.

4.4. Obstacles to Resource Construction

Currently, online resources are basically divided into two types: the first type is teacher-made resources, such as PPTs and self-recorded teaching videos; the second type is ready-made online resources, such as MOOCs, short instructional videos, and online courses from other teachers.

In the first case, take teachers' self-made resources for instance. A high-quality instructional video requires teachers to have a computer system or a set of recording equipment above a certain technical specification, as well as some such prerequisite software as video-recording, video-editing, video-broadcasting, etc., whose parts of the primary functions are free, and if teachers intend to use advanced features, they have to pay for additionally. It's not a small expense for some teachers, hence they are reluctant to invest. What's more, as with the expiration of some software, the previous videos cannot be played and watched or it necessitates the learning of some new software, etc. Although the schools has special advanced recording-broadcasting-classrooms, they are very limited. If teachers have a plan to use, they need to apply to the school first, then go through the procedure, and then waste time queuing up for the use of it. As a result, to avoid trouble some teachers choose not to use.

For the second type, it's now the case that although teachers and students are immersed in a large number of resources every day, there are few high-quality online teaching resources, whereas English resources and teaching auxiliary materials in real business situations are more of a scarcity, and sometimes even no appropriate resources are available. The use of websites with abundant English

information and resources such as Google is restricted in Mainland China, and it is extremely difficult for teachers to find or download authentic and original English materials from these websites. Even though some universities and institutions have such quality resources, they are for internal use only. As for teachers and students outside, the resources are either closed to or paid for. Teachers themselves are not willing to buy it out of their own pocket, and the school do not undertake centralized procurement, which causes difficulties in the construction of online resources and serious insufficiency.

5. Countermeasures and Suggestions for Improving the Quality of Blended Teaching

5.1. Optimize the Structural and Policy Environment for Promoting Blended Teaching

5.1.1. Strengthen the roles of Governments

The sustainable development of mixed teaching in China needs further guidance from governments, including guiding the development direction, selecting excellent course resources, establishing mixed teaching quality standards, coordinating teaching platforms and tools, etc. The government should also take the reform degree and teaching level of blended teaching as key indicators to evaluate educational informationization of schools, and consequently achieve the goal of promoting construction with evaluation and boosting its normalization.

5.1.2. Set Up Curriculum Construction Standards under Blended Teaching Mode

Governments and schools should establish different course construction standards, develop the concrete construction scheme and enforce regulation based on the categories and features of the teaching course, coupled with students' demand. The construction ranges from the course description, teaching syllabus, course agenda, resource construction, online question bank and exercise library to the teaching archives filing, all of which need be of clearness and refinement. In the meantime, a quality assessment system is supposed to be established to measure, monitor and control the course construction process and teaching effect, and provide feedback. With these curriculum construction standards, teachers know from what aspects to design, how to design, what the criteria is, rather than undertaking it haphazardly and blindly.

5.1.3. Promulgate Relevant Management Policies to Promote the Reform of Blended Teaching

Schools should build a teaching management system integrating online self-learning and offline teaching. This kind of system should be relatively less restrictive at the initial stage, that is, some teachers are allowed to fail in the practice of mixed teaching and some students are allowed to refuse online self-learning. Such more inclusive measures can effectively promote teachers to dare to research and practice mixed teaching.

a) Redefine the workload of teachers. On one hand, schools need to reduce the prescribed workload to release the free time of teachers. Without sufficient time, it is impossible for teachers to devote themselves to teaching reform. On the other hand, teachers should be given full liberty. In other words, teachers are allowed to organize teaching flexibly according to the characteristics of the subject and the requirements of professional training objectives under the condition of completing the rated workload.

b) Strengthen the support mechanism for the promotion of mixed teaching. In order to ensure the continuous and smooth development of mixed teaching, schools should give all-round support, for example, funding to purchase software and equipment for teachers to build their own teaching resources, actively seeking cross-region, cross-university, cross-industry, government-industry-university-research cooperation, passively organizing teachers to make collective preparation for lessons, reconstructing course knowledge points, jointly formulating teaching plans, compiling or customizing proprietary textbooks, etc., organizing and encouraging teachers to share teaching experience and resources.

c) Structure an incentive mechanism to encourage teachers to participate in mixed teaching. Schools should issue effective policies to encourage teachers to actively engage in mixed teaching reform, and commend and reward those who have achieved good results in the process to publicize their important roles. For the purpose of enriching the theoretical basis for mixed teaching, schools should also increase the proportion of blended teaching reform in scientific research project, gradually raise the funding for the educational reform subject, support all kinds of teaching teams and the scientific research teams to carry out research, and encourage departments to set up corresponding research centers. What's more important is that the scientific research achievements obtained during this period are better to be rewarded.

5.2. Perfect the Safeguard Mechanism for the Development of Blended Teaching

5.2.1. Improve the Sharing Mechanism of Digital Resource Construction

a) Governments should introduce policies to guide virtual platforms, professional institutions, universities and websites to further open up resources, communicate and cooperate with each other, and provide unified and harmonious space and resource sharing for mixed teaching, thus reducing the difficulty of teachers' online resource construction and enhancing the utilization rate of online resources.

b) Schools should invest in establishing more professional and advanced video-recording classrooms or smart classrooms, and simplify application procedures so that teachers can conveniently record teaching videos.

c) Universities of the same category could form an alliance to share experience and resources and achieve a win-win situation.

d) Schools can import national-or provincial-rated premium open online courses and retrofit existing high-quality resources according to talent training objectives and students' characteristics, which can effectively and substantially improve the quality of online course resources of schools.

5.2.2. Optimize the Service Functions of Online Platforms

a) Eliminate defects in existing platform functionality. The currently available online teaching platform should further improve its technology, enhance its stability, remove the existing loopholes or defects for purpose of better satisfying the needs of teachers' and students', for example, increasing the compatibility with software from other organizations or companies in order to relieve teachers' burden of inputting information and save time, making the questions more diverse or setting up a customized question-type area, which eases the creation of teachers' own types of question, and fixing loopholes in existing exam, homework and evaluation systems, etc.

b) Launch more intelligent and personalized service functions. Existing online platforms can upgrade their technologies and introduce more intelligent, personalized and interesting service functions. For example, through the use of situational awareness technology, the platforms can immediately perceive students' boredom, anxiety, happiness and other emotions in the process of self-learning, and then get the learning status and react to it accordingly and promptly, which is helpful for students to improve learning effect.

5.3. Improve Teachers' Blended Teaching Ability

Schools should make a top-level design for teacher development, which can not only reflect the overall development trend of the schools in depth, but also meet the individualized needs of teachers' growth. It is necessary to guarantee that every teacher has the equal chance of being trained and physical measures should be issued to execute the teacher training scheme, for instance, reformulating the teaching and research workload, and giving support to training funds and other aspects. Training channels and methods should be diversified as well.

Schools should organize teachers to attend a series of training for the construction and implementation of mixed teaching courses, from concept cultivation, instructional design, application of platform to specific execution process, and at the same time constantly improve the quality and level of teachers from various aspects, such as moral sentiment, professionalism, competence, information technology literacy and teaching innovation. Take the use of information technology in teaching as an example, after training, teachers should universally be capable of flexibly applying various multimedia and APPs to assist teaching, and make more professional, informative and interesting courseware and record teaching videos on their own.

5.4. Promote Students' Online Learning Ability

Before classes begin, teachers had better organize students to participate in unified training on blended teaching to help them get to know about its emergence, development, characteristics and essence, and moreover, recognize that it is a more efficient way of learning than the traditional classroom learning and will benefit them throughout their lives. Only by being aware of these, can students learn to take advantage of the online platforms, overcome maladjustment, eliminate resistance, and be more actively involved in independent learning.

Nowadays, students almost never leave their mobile phones in their hands, and furthermore, their abilities of network application and to adapt to new technologies are often quite a lot better than teachers. With the addition that mobile terminals are becoming increasingly convenient, intelligent and humanized, some network operating techniques can be picked up by students without any difficulty. We can use this to our advantage to guide and teach students. Whenever they encounter problems in learning, what comes to their mind first is how to take the initiative to obtain information on the network platforms with abundant resources and use them to solve problems on their own. Don't go to teachers every time they have a problem and reap the benefits.

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