

Defining the Optimum Blend for Language Learning – The UK Approach

Introduction

My name is Suzanne Steel and I am the Principal Burnham Lecturer at the Defence Centre for Languages and Culture (DCLC) in the UK. I am responsible for the leadership and management of our team of civilian language tutors and for the continuous improvement of the courses which we deliver. In this presentation I provide an overview of the process which we have gone through to try to determine the optimum blend for language courses delivered at DCLC. I will illustrate the methodology we have used, the framework for analysis and some of the early lessons we are learning as we start to implement a blended approach.

Methodology

Like many of your organisations, DCLC have been on a journey which has seen the rapid transition from face to face courses to 100% online delivery. With early signs that the pandemic was coming under control we identified a need to plan for our future post-COVID delivery strategy. To enable this, we launched the Future Delivery Strategy project which involved an evidence-based review of available data including staff and student feedback, internal and external research, analysis of performance results and engagement with all key DCLC stakeholders. Our analysis found that there was limited appetite for a return to face to face learning and a similar reluctance to remain fully online. The answer for our organisation lay in a blended approach which would see a mix of face to face and online activities, underpinned by appropriate technology.

Analytical Framework

Having decided to pursue a blended approach, we identified a need to conduct further analysis to determine the type of blend which would work best for the delivery of core foreign languages. We selected a model to ensure that all factors were considered. This model is a quadrant with four key factors – Learner, Learning, Culture and Resources. Each factor was considered in turn and discussed through a series of focus groups with our delivery teams. The aim was to ensure a balanced consideration of all factors in order to identify a blended solution which would:

- Meet the needs of our **Learners**
- Deliver the linguistic **Learning** Outputs required by UK Defence
- Fit within our organisational and learning **Culture**
- Be deliverable within existing **Resources**

Applying this framework gave us an in-depth understanding of our organisation and helped to identify key criteria that would need to be met in any future blend. This was a comprehensive piece of work and it isn't possible to cover everything within a 30 minute presentation. I will therefore give a few examples of areas where we used the analytical findings to inform the design of the blend.

- **Learner Example** - We identified we have a diverse group of learners and frequently deliver courses to students with a mix of educational backgrounds, ranks and previous language experience. Differentiation and the ability to deliver to mixed ability groups are therefore key requirements for our future blend. We are addressing this by introducing some pre-course 'learn to learn' activities to help students with study skills and to enable them to grasp the basics of grammar in their own language. We are also looking to produce a range of differentiated resources which can be accessed by students through the Learning Management System.

- **Learning Example** – We identified that the level of the course has an impact on the optimum blend. Our research found that students at the lower SLP levels require more face to face time with teachers as they get to grips with intensive language learning and create social and support networks. Conversely, we found that students at the higher SLP levels are generally more confident independent learners and therefore require less face to face time with the teacher and are equipped for more self-directed learning. The blend we are introducing reflects this and our courses will run as a graduated blend which will see the balance of face to face and online shift as students progress through the course.
- **Culture Example** – We identified the desire within UK military education to shift from a learning culture of ‘training push’ to a more student-centred approach of ‘learning pull’. Our blend seeks to enable this through introduction of approaches such as the flipped classroom where students are empowered to conduct meaningful learning before they attend the face to face sessions. We are also focusing on creating resources which are designed to be accessed independently by students, ensuring these are intuitive and user-friendly.
- **Resources** – We identified that there are potentially significant resource constraints and limited opportunity to invest in new platforms for language learning. We therefore took the pragmatic decision to align the future delivery strategy with the UK’s future IT strategy. This will see the blend delivered through the Defence Learning Environment (DLE) and MS Teams, both of which form part of the wider Defence strategy. We are also exploring how time and cost can be saved by curating existing learning content from open source, rather than developing all materials bespoke and from scratch.

Early Lessons Learned

We are in the early stages of implementing the blended approach and we expect full implementation to take 6 – 12 months. Inevitably we are learning lessons and our early findings include the following:

- **The blend needs to be tailored to fit the context** – there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to blended design. The quadrant model can be used by organisations to tailor the approach to their specific context.
- **A structured, evidence-based approach works** – taking a project approach can help to structure conversations and to gain stakeholder ‘buy in’ for a blended approach.
- **Evolution not revolution** – transitioning to a blended solution takes time and requires an iterative approach. You won’t get it right first time!
- **Technology must be integrated in all aspects of delivery** – a truly blended approach needs to integrate technology within all activities, including in the face to face classroom.
- **Reliable IT infrastructure is a critical enabler** – the best blended approach can be de-railed by unreliable wifi so this is a key consideration when designing.
- **Staff development is a continuous process** – the skills to deliver a blended approach are different to those needed to teach face to face or online. There needs to be an investment in ongoing staff development.

- **Students need to be empowered (and trusted)** – one of the greatest benefits can be learner empowerment and blends should be designed with this in mind.

Summary

This presentation sets out one approach for implementing a blended approach which may prove useful for other organisations that are looking to define a future delivery strategy.