

## **A CASE STUDY OF EFL BLENDED LEARNING BASED ON SUPERSTAR LEARNING SYSTEM IN CHINA**

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### **Abstract**

The main goal of this study is to propose and develop a pedagogical approach to blended learning in an undergraduate course and evaluate the implementation process and the satisfaction of the students. With the help of the research instrument like class observation and questionnaire, a case study method is adopted in this research in order to find answers to the following questions: how should teachers do with online course design in a blended learning environment? How should teachers carry out teaching practice in a face-to-face class? Can EFL learners improve their learning competency through Superstar Learning System -based blended learning? First, the researcher reviews the literature related to the current situation of college English teaching and learning in China, the concept of blended learning, and an overview of the Superstar Learning System. Next, outlining the online course design for the book the researcher is using in her class and practising one of the texts are described. The design is then evaluated using a questionnaire given to 179 participants. Survey results show that blended learning based on Superstar Learning System can provide a flexible and dynamic learning environment and improve students' learning competency. Contents of online courses must be designed according to students' needs and must be developed for all components of blended learning. The results also show students' overall satisfaction is high.

**Keywords:** blended learning, learning competency, Superstar Learning System

### **Introduction**

Face-to-face classroom teaching used to be the trend before the year 2003 when College English Curriculum Requirements (trial) drafted by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China was about to regulate college English teaching. With the ongoing reform, higher education learning mode is surely being impacted, which was going to shift from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred one and computer-assisted teaching mode was going to be adopted to support this process (Gao, 2012). Since researchers believe that "college English teaching assisted with information technology can greatly improve teaching quality and efficiency" (Luo, 2021, p.230), the adoption of new ways is being constantly looked for in order "to improve education quality, enhance student engagement, and manage knowledge resources" (Prifti, 2022, p.120).

### ***Current situation of college English teaching and learning in China***

College English is a compulsory course in China and students are supposed to improve their learning competency within 1 or 2 years of college study. As the college English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) stipulates, the ultimate goal of college English teaching is to improve students' language application abilities, especially listening and speaking, that is to say, applying language knowledge to practical use. At the same time, it should enhance students' ability to autonomous learning, and improve their comprehensive cultural qualities in order to meet the requirements of social development and international communication (CECR, 2007).

Despite decades of efforts, how to improve students' learning competency remains a brain-racking problem for policy-makers, professors, teaching practitioners and students as well. Since the teaching focus changes from exam orientation in high school to ability orientation in university, many freshers can't adjust to the new pace of college life. Wang & Wang (2011) investigated that many freshers are weak in English communicative abilities, they have limited language knowledge and they don't know how to use new learning methods and a new way of thinking to adapt themselves to the new challenging teaching requirements and teaching mode. Entering into university, many students don't have a clear goal and don't know how to study even though "they have a high expectation but low investment in English study, a systematic study plan is rarely seen" (Sun, 2016, p.248). Wang also said that "blending information technology with foreign language courses and constructing an appropriate language teaching internet ecology can help to improve teaching quality and promote the reformation of teaching contents and teaching methods, consequently stimulate students' learning interest and enhance learning effect" (Wang & Wang, 2011, p.10).

### ***Concept of blended learning***

Some researchers believe that blended learning is a learning activity that integrates face-to-face learning and online approaches to instruction (Colis & Moonen, 2002; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, 2006; Macdonald, 2008). Researchers holding this view believe that the combination of online teaching platforms and traditional face-to-face teaching increases the interaction between teachers and students, breaks the traditional single classroom mode and makes the two complementary advantages, which is worthy of widespread promotion. Some researchers explain that blended learning is only a method which is used by making use of the advances in computer technology in a learning process. And only those learning with 30 % to 79% (Allen et al., 2007) or more than 25% (Means et al., 2013) of the teaching content carried out online can be called blended learning. Other experts regard online education as a supplement to face-to-face learning, not a full learning approach, and therefore blended learning is not a simple addition of two learning modes or a simple integration of information and communication technologies with face-to-face approaches (Walker & Keeffe, 2010). The amount of technology used in blended learning becomes a demarcation from the stage of technology application to the stage of technology integration. As the stage developed into "internet+ phase" (Feng et al., 2018, p.14) more researchers were concerned with the outcome of blended learning, agreeing that blended learning was student-centred learning (Goodyear & Dudley, 2015). The development of

information-based technology and the use of a learning platform are indispensable for blended learning. At the same time, there is no doubt that the effect of the implementation of blended learning is decided by the lecturers' literacy in information technology as well as their teaching competence.

### ***Overview of superstar learning system***

As Stockwell (2016) said that learning based on information communication technology like the Internet was convenient, ubiquitous, interactive and individualized, which was beneficial to language learning. Superstar Learning System (SLS) is a learning platform designed by Superstar Company in China, which is a system for course learning assisted with the courseware, knowledge dissemination and management sharing (Liu, 2022). SLS is flexible to use since it consists of three terminals: a livestream terminal, a mobile phone terminal and a computer terminal. Needless to say, livestream terminal is used for online teaching when the situation requires so. Since the operation of this livestream terminal is not as convenient as other livestream teaching platforms, it is not discussed in this study. Both the mobile phone and computer terminal can be used online and offline. They each have an activity library, in which various activities can be carried out, such as attendance (check-in), select, in-class tests, discussion, quick answer, questionnaire, group task, vote, rate, and feedback. And the function of resources like course resources, a question bank, an assignment bank and a test bank can also be found in both terminals which can facilitate blended learning to a great extent.

Though most of the built-in functions are the same on the mobile phone terminal and the computer terminal, they each have their distinctive features and can be utilized in full length on different occasions. The mobile phone terminal offers other accessible functions like a whiteboard, timer, live video, and synchronic classroom which are found on the computer terminal. Different from the mobile phone terminal, the computer terminal is usually used by practitioners to prepare for their online course design due to its user-friendly alignment interface and enormous storage capacity to store resources. Thus, the two terminals can complement each other and be used in a blended learning environment.

SLS is open to teachers, students and all the other users without any charge from 2015 on. Like many other learning systems, SLS plays an important part during the pandemic to help many institutions to carry out online learning after the lockdown policy was carried out. This learning platform can enhance students' learning interest, attitude and academic achievements and a teaching mode based on a superstar learning system can produce a golden course (Liu, 2022).

To implement college English blended learning, the type of learning platform used for online learning should be agreed upon by both teachers and students. Taking all the factors in mind, teachers should design the course and organize the teaching contents in a smart way on the learning platform so that students can achieve a better learning outcome through a blended learning mode.

### **Method**

This study adopts a case study research method and SLS is the platform under investigation which is used for blended learning. Data analysis started from course design on this learning platform. The researcher designed the course according to

content and language-integrated learning philosophy and then she carried out her teaching practice to participants in her classes for one semester.

The researcher observed students' learning performances in the class and then sent a questionnaire with 10 questions to the researcher's students by the end of that semester. Two questions about their gender and major were included and 8 questions about their SLS using experience and attitude toward blended learning were included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire which was given to the participants intended to find out whether blended learning based on SLS had really benefited the participants and it also tried to find out what were the problems that needed to be investigated further.

The study population was a mass of 179 first-year college students from the researcher's 5 classes at the researcher's university. The course was from the 2022 to 2023 autumn semester and it took 16 weeks.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Online course design*

Online learning should be sustainable and instructional activities should be more hybrid because effective design and instructional strategies for online courses can help to encourage participation in courses (Baldwin, 2019). Yet, the current English learning in Chinese universities can't assure continuous and sustainable study through students' college life, which in turn affects students' level and their improvement in English application abilities (Qiao et al., 2010). Superstar company has collected sufficient samples all over China during the pandemic. They analyzed the data collected and the stability of the platform and then recommended a six-step teaching procedure to teachers, which is shown in figure 1.

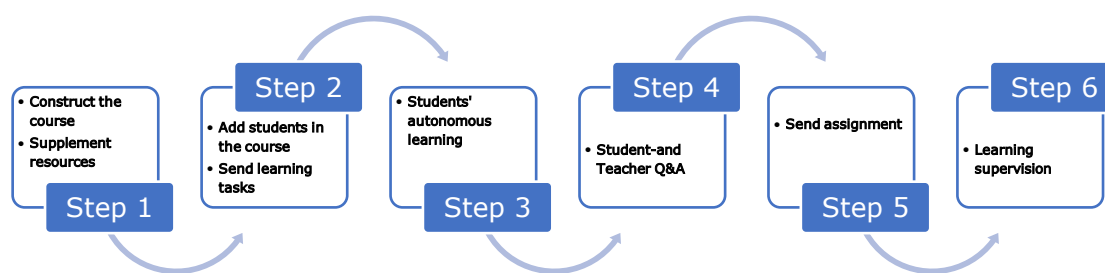


Figure 1. Six steps to carry out online learning based on SLS

From this recommended online teaching procedure, it is implied that “the investment in upfront planning of a course is critical to constructing a comprehensive plan of instruction” (Gibson & Dunning, 2012, p.209). Based on a careful analysis of students' needs and course requirements, the researcher designed the following course plan. It is believed that multiple and meaningful cultural materials will be more welcomed and more appreciated by students if provided online before class rather than during class or after class (Raes et al., 2015).

Therefore, the adoption of content and language-integrated learning is suitable for the targeted students as far as the SLS was taken into consideration.

The researcher had carefully designed the course on the “chapter” interface with the following 5 parts: learning objective, skill, cultural background, courseware, and unit test. And the following table shows how the researcher designed the “chapter” for the coursebook she was teaching during the semester. Because the use of a textbook is common in College English teaching in China and the teacher is usually suggested to adopt the teaching objectives provided in the relevant teacher’s manual, the researcher has accordingly acknowledged the suggested specifics of teaching objectives (Ji et al., 2014) to facilitate her description of the overall course design. Since the specifics of the courseware section and unit test section are not suitable for table description, thereby only specifics about learning objectives, skills and cultural background are presented in this study.

Table 1. Course design on SLS “chapter” interface

Text and Title	Section	Specifics
<i>1 Writing for Myself</i>	Learning objective	I. grasp the main idea (the essence of writing is to write what one enjoys writing) and structure of the text (narration in chronological sequence)
		II. appreciate the narrative skills demonstrated in the text (selection of details, repetition, coherence)
		III. master the key language points and learn how to use them in context
		IV. understand the cultural background related to the context
		V. express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>Growing Up</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities
		VI. write a letter of congratulations in an appropriate way
	Skill	I. how to write a letter of congratulations II. what is coherence and cohesion
	Cultural background	the pain of growing up; introduction to John Lennon
<i>2 All the Cabbie Had Was a Letter</i>	Learning objective	I. grasp the main idea (never delay expressing your true feelings to a friend) and structure of the text (developing a story around a letter)
		II. appreciate characteristic features of spoken English as demonstrated in the text (spoken English is much more informal than written English)
		III. master the key language points and learn how to use them in context
		IV. understand the cultural background related to the context

		V.	express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>Friendship</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities
	Skill	VI.	write a personal letter in an appropriate way
		I.	how to write a personal letter
		II.	what is simile and metaphor
	Cultural background	I.	what is friendship
		II.	examples of great friendship
3 <i>Public Attitudes Toward Science</i>	Learning objective	I.	understand the main idea (to ensure the survival of human civilization, measures must be taken to help the public understand science) and structure of the text (introducing a topic, developing the topic with supporting details, drawing a conclusion)
		II.	appreciate the style differences between narrative writing and expository writing
		III.	grasp the key language points and learn how to use them in context
		IV.	understand the cultural background related to the context
		V.	express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>Understanding Science</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities
		VI.	write an expository essay about how science changes our lives
	Skill		how to write an expository essay
	Cultural background		introduction to Stephen Hawking
4 <i>Tony Trivisonno's American dream</i>	Learning objective	I.	understand the main idea (Tony Trivisonno) realized his American dream through his own efforts) and structure of the text (one part telling the story of Tony's life and the other giving the author's comments on it)
		II.	learn to describe a person by his/her characteristic features, together with supporting details which demonstrate the features
		III.	grasp the key language points and learn how to use them in context understand what is American Dream and what is Chinese Dream and learn to contrast them
		IV.	understand the cultural background related to the context
		V.	express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>the American Dream</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities
		VI.	write a narrative in the third-person singular about the story of Tony Trivisonno

	Skill	I. how to write a narrative
		II. how to describe a person
	Cultural background	introduction to American Dream and Chinese Dream
5	<i>The Company Man</i>	Learning objective
		I. grasp the main idea (the author tries to define a typical workaholic in the American corporate world with the story of Phil) and structure of the text
		II. appreciate the writing strategy and style demonstrated in the text (to set the tone of irony by choice of words, selection of details, use of quotation marks, etc.)
		III. master the key language points and learn how to use them in context
		IV. understand the cultural background related to the context
		V. express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>Work to Live or Live to Work</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities
		VI. write a letter of sympathy or condolence in an appropriate way
	Skill	I. how to write a letter of sympathy or condolence
		II. what is irony
	Cultural background	relationship between work and life
6	<i>A Valentine Story</i>	Learning objective
		I. grasp the main idea (the way one reacts to unattractive people reveals one's true character) and structure of the text
		II. appreciate the narrative skills demonstrated in the text (switching between tenses, change in narrators), the use of rhetorical devices (simile and metaphor) and the use of informal language in conversations
		III. master the key language points and learn how to use them in context
		IV. understand the cultural background related to the context
		V. express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>Romance</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities
		VI. write a letter of invitation and acknowledgement in an appropriate way
	Skill	how to write a letter of invitation and acknowledgement
	Cultural background	introduction to Saint Valentine's Day

7 <i>What animals really think</i>	Learning objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. understand the main idea (some animals seem capable of thinking when it is in their own interests to do so) and structure of the text (introduction, 3 subheadings to give 3 supporting examples, conclusion)</li> <li>II. appreciate the importance of examples in exposition</li> <li>III. grasp the key language points and learn how to use them in context</li> <li>IV. understand the cultural background related to the context</li> <li>V. express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>Animal Intelligence</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities</li> <li>VI. write an essay about animal intelligence using relevant examples</li> </ul>
	Skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. how to write an expository paragraph with examples</li> <li>II. what is anaphora</li> </ul>
	Cultural background	introduction to animal intelligence
8 <i>Fable of the Lazy Teenager</i>	Learning objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. understand the main idea (teenagers' idleness and ignorance will seriously affect both themselves and society in general) and structure of the text (two parts—the author's concern and his proposed remedy)</li> <li>II. learn how to write a cause-and-effect analysis</li> <li>III. grasp the key language points and learn how to use them in context</li> <li>IV. understand the cultural background related to the context</li> <li>V. express yourself more freely on the theme of <i>Educational problems</i> after doing a series of theme-related reading, listening, speaking and writing activities</li> <li>VI. write an essay about the use of computers in schools using cause and effect</li> </ul>
	Skill	what is cause and effect
	Cultural background	educational problems in China and the world

Since the ability of autonomous learning is emphasized in CECR, it then becomes a concern for teachers when they practice blended learning. The above table showed a detailed course design on SLS for the sake of students' autonomous learning. All the supplementary materials in language, skill and cultural background were provided, which "created a real or nearly real learning environment" (Shao, 2018, p.61) and aimed to improve students' integrated learning competency. As Zimmerman has discussed self-regulated learning, the online course required by the researcher guides students to know where, when and what to learn. By learning the

assigned tasks and discussing with fellow students, students can finally know how to learn and why to learn.

### *Offline teaching practice*

Blended learning is a seamless amalgamation of carefully selected online modules with face-to-face instruction (Francis & Shannon, 2013). A nationwide survey conducted by Wang & Wang (2011) showed offline face-to-face class is still dominating though the mode of online autonomous learning is trendy. In order to better illustrate how the researcher has carried out her college English blended learning in reality, the study takes one specific class, Text 4, for example.

Text 4 is a fictional narrative story about an Italian immigrant called Tony Trivisonno who went to America to seek his American Dream. Compared with other great American industrialists, Tony's affairs were tiny. Yet, his vision, determination, self-control, optimism, self-respect and integrity finally won him respect. Not only himself but also his family and friends finally moved to America and settled down there. Before the face-to-face classroom lecture, students were required to preview the text online with the aid of materials provided by the researcher on SLS.

At the beginning of the class, the researcher began the class by showing a video clip from *The Great Gatsby*, which students were required to watch before class. And a discussion about American Dream was carried out and the topic was already provided in SLS "discussion" section. To consolidate students' understanding of the concept of the American Dream, a listening audio was played and students listened and answered questions based on the audio material. Afterwards, the researcher guided students to do a theme-related blank-filling exercise in the textbook to see the essence of the American Dream. After this bridge-in part, the researcher sent a vocabulary check through SLS mobile phone terminal, which took a few minutes. Following this, the results of this vocabulary check were projected onto the screen through the projection function installed on the mobile phone terminal. The researcher explained the errors made by students and further explained some important language points.

During the process of explaining the text, classroom teaching time was mostly spent on background introduction, text analysis, sentence explanation and many class interactions. In the whole process, SLS was used several times. Take the "quick answer" function for example. When a question was thrown to the students, the researcher sent a "quick answer" message on the mobile phone terminal. Students who were ready to answer the question could click the button and stand up to answer.

In the second-class period, another learning objective—how to describe a person—was to be achieved. Since students had already learned how to describe a person from the text explanation, therefore, the researcher sent the question "Who is Tony Trivisonno and what made him successful?" to students through the "discussion" function on SLS. The answers were also projected and shared in the class. In the latter half of the second-class period, the researcher explained the Chinese- to -English translation assignment to students. Through this assignment explanation, students learned some translation strategies, proper names, differences between words like "maintain" and "sustain" and most importantly, students got to know the concept of the Chinese dream and they also knew how to compare and

contrast. At the end of this class, an in-class test was sent through SLS to students to summarize what they had learned. After-class assignment about the differences and similarities between the Chinese Dream and American Dream was given and students were required to submit their homework to SLS before the due time.

During the whole process of classroom teaching, the researcher and students used the mobile phone terminal of SLS several times, which met the basic requirement for blended learning, namely, integrated traditional learning, e-learning with mobile learning (Hu & Wang, 2019), which had greatly improved class interaction and students' participation. (Liu, 2022)

### *Questionnaire survey results and discussions*

After a questionnaire survey was distributed through the “questionnaire” function in SLS to a total number of 179 students by the end of the investigated semester, 179 valid questionnaires were recovered. Among the investigated students, 145 were male students and 34 were female students. 173 students were majoring in natural science and engineering while 6 were majoring in humanities and social science. 132 students didn't use SLS in their high school, which accounted for 73.74% and only 47 students used SLS in high school. It showed how important it was to instruct students to use the designated learning platform. The survey results are shown as follows.

Table 2. Questionnaire survey of students' feedback on college English blended learning based on SLS

Questions in the questionnaire	Options	Number of people (%)
Did you use SLS before you entered the university?	Yes	26.26
	No	73.74
What functions of SLS do you use most?	For class interaction	50.84
	For online preview and review	49.16
Which terminal do you often use to access SLS to study?	Computer	7.26
	Mobile phone	92.74
Which part of the chapter section do you use most?	Learning objective	11.73
	Skill	2.79
	Cultural background	5.59
	Courseware	13.97
	Unit test	60.34
Which function on the mobile phone terminal do you use most?	Check-in	20.67
	Select	4.47
	Quick answer	6.7
	In-class test	23.46
	Questionnaire	3.35
	Vote	8.38
	Discussion	13.97
	Chat room	18.99

Whether the course design has helped your learning competency?	Yes	91.06
	No	8.94
Whether you have improved your learning competency in college English blended learning based on SLS?	Yes, in learning method	64.8
	Yes, in learning attitude	15.64
	Yes, in learning efficiency	12.85
	No	6.7
Whether college English blended learning poses challenges?	Yes, more self-discipline is needed.	68.72
	Yes, more time and energy should be devoted.	17.88
	Yes, the practitioner needs to be more careful about the teaching design.	6.7
	No, there is no difference between traditional learning and blended learning.	6.7

The above questionnaire survey results show that 50.84% of the students use SLS mainly for class interaction while 49.16% of them use SLS mainly for class preview and review, the ratio of which is almost 1 to 1. The result indicates that SLS provides more possibilities not only for online autonomous learning but also for offline face-to-face classroom interaction.

The result also shows that only 7.26% of the students access the SLS from the computer terminal while 92.74% of them access SLS from the mobile phone terminal. This result reminds the teacher that when he/she designs the course on the learning platform he/she should make it more accessible and easier to recognize on the mobile phone terminal. And it also reminds the teacher that not all the functions on the system should be utilized in order to avoid confusion or distraction.

As for the functions installed on the mobile phone terminal, 18.99% of the students use the chatroom function on the mobile phone terminal, altogether 81.01% of them use other functions which can be only activated by the teacher, which suggests that Chinese students are somewhat passive recipients of knowledge. At the same time, even though students use the learning platform for different purposes, as many as 60.34% of the students use online learning only for the unit test, which reflects Chinese students' strong consciousness of exams, which is partly attributed to the exam orientation of the educational system.

Despite the fact that only 26.26% of the students use SLS in their high school, 91.06% of them have expressed a positive attitude towards the researcher's course design after using SLS and 93.3% of the population say they have improved their learning competency through blended learning. However, one thing that cannot be overlooked is among all the improvements the students have made the least one is learning efficiency. As low as 12.85% of the students have expressed a positive attitude toward learning efficiency. The explanation, for this reason, can be found in the challenges we are facing: blended learning requires more self-discipline and devotion of time. Both parties, especially students, need to be self-disciplined and devote more time to blended learning. Without them, blended learning may not be as effective as practitioners imagined. Therefore, in further studies, researchers

could explore more helpful and meaningful solutions to improve students' self-discipline and devotion.

### Conclusion

Since college English course is an obligatory course in any higher education in China, students' English learning competency is highly demanded. With the advance of information technology and the dramatic change in learning mode caused by the pandemic in recent years, blended learning for college English classes becomes very necessary. It is very important to select a suitable learning platform to bind teachers and students together before class, during class and after class. The platform should not only help students with their online autonomous learning but also facilitate face-to-face in-class interaction. SLS is user-friendly, easy to access and easy to operate and it is a great help to blended learning. Yet, blended learning doesn't simply mean the combination of teaching tools, the combination of online and offline learning, it also implies the hybrid of different teaching methods, different assessment methods and changes in learning habits. In the implementation process of college, English blended learning, the teacher has more responsibilities to guide, motivate and supervise students since many students are not very self-disciplined, consequently a well-designed course on the learning platform is crucial, which may increase or decrease students' learning interest, learning attitude and learning efficiency. In a word, the ultimate goal of any teaching practice is to enhance students' learning competency and efficiency. Blended learning or not, it should be effective student-centred learning, which can make students competent in this learning era.

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