



# Effectiveness of College English Course through Blended Learning+Unipus: A Pilot Case Study

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Blended learning, the convergence of online and face-to-face education, is very popular in higher education in China. The effectiveness of the teaching model of the blended learning+Unipus on College English course among the first-year students at a conventional university in China, was discussed in this paper. This study aimed to explore better ways to improve students' academic performance. Students in this pilot study were divided into experimental and control groups. Their basic performance in the English language was tested at the beginning to ensure that the two groups of students had similar language abilities. Then, during the following semester, the Unipus-supporting blended learning approach was applied in the experimental group, while the previous teaching method was applied in the control group without Unipus support. Experimental data gained from the exam at the end of the semester were quantitatively analyzed to verify the effectiveness of Unipus-supporting blended learning in the College English courses, and the students' class performance was evaluated qualitatively. The results showed that the blended learning based on Unipus could improve the students' learning achievements compared with those in the control group. Still, for a better picture of the future of College English education in China, this blended learning+Unipus method in College English courses needs to be further explored and perfected.

**Keywords:** *blended learning, Unipus, effectiveness, College English*



## 1. Introduction

As the impetus of modern technology, various devices and software are available to all levels in the education field. The digital age is widely popularized in preschool, elementary and secondary schools or college. Teachers and students have been encouraged to adopt a wealth of online materials to transform and expand teaching and learning without the constraints of time, place, contents, textbooks, etc. Modern technology, a useful tool to develop a personalized and spontaneous style of study, can be used to teach all courses, such as reading, speaking, writing, listening, and practicing. Especially applying educational technologies in teaching and learning is an ideal approach for distance education nowadays. Blended learning is a convergence of e-learning and face-to-face teaching (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Blended learning is an efficient learning mode, which is a project-centric learning method that combines various advanced educational technologies (Powell and Verma, 2015). It is popular in teaching in China.

A teacher is a determiner to impart knowledge and students are his or her recipients to obtain information. Learning words and grammar rules are the focus of such a teaching-and-learning model of language education. There are defects in such traditional teaching. For example, some students cannot apply such traditional teaching properly, lack interest in learning, or are reluctant to communicate in English. Even some students have mastered the bulk of basic language knowledge, but they have no self-study abilities, or their learning effectiveness is not as good as expected.

With the advancement of integration of education and information technology in China and the enrichment of new instructing methods, new technologies, and new resources, the connotations and practices of blended learning have been deeply applied to classroom teaching of all courses due to its dual advantages of traditional face-to-face teaching and online learning. Its flexible organization methods, diversified resource forms, and interactive channels are favored by many researchers and teachers. All these achievements of this blended learning approach depend on the fast progress in information technology, the continuous advancement of education digitalization, and changes in the construction of the environment, resource management, activity patterns, and teaching-learning methods. Additionally, “Internet+education”, a challenge and an opportunity to promote the in-depth integration of information technology and education and teaching, also provides methods and paths for blended learning research and practice.



Therefore, this study dwells on the effectiveness of a new teaching model of the blended learning+Unipus on College English course among the first-year students at a conventional university in China. Unipus serves as an online learning platform providing College English e-textbooks and extended learning materials, especially a sea of exam databases, for College English learners and their instructors. This case study aimed to explore better ways to improve academic performance. Students can make full use of their learning time and resources to enhance their abilities to use English in real life by breaking through time and space barriers to students' English learning and expanding their learning activities in and out of class.

## **2. Literature Review**

There has been a lot of research and extensive exploration on applying different technologies to improve learning efficiency. Blended learning can provide students with a suitable learning environment for better learning efficiency. Blended learning includes various learning elements, such as teaching methods, a learner-centered environment, and advanced educational technology (Trigwell and Prosser, 2013). Focusing on learners' learning experience is an important feature of blended learning (Bersin, 2016). Blended learning can improve the learning environment, especially in organizing teaching activities from the teacher-centered model to the student-centered model (Fatimah and Achmad, 2019). It allows students to control their learning time independently, which is a brand-new learning experience (Michael and Heather, 2017). It is a student-centered learning method with the biggest feature to meet learners' needs (Meyer and Zhu, 2013).

Both for teachers and learners, different technologies and methods can be adopted to achieve the expected results. Eppy et al. (2020) found that most respondents were positive about using online platforms, e.g., Zoom cloud meeting and Google Meet. There are many online platforms, and teachers should use a suitable platform to instruct teaching activities. Yan et al. (2018) indicated that the blending learning+gamification approach could develop students' better skills in envisioning antithesis and providing rebuttals. Teachers also can adapt teaching procedures to maximize the benefits of online and offline teaching. Xu (2020) stated that once a few modifications were made to the original intervention, students developed a more positive attitude toward MALL assignments, and their perception of the usefulness of the tasks increased.



In China, test scores and English certificates have been the requirements and focus for employers, students, teachers, etc., while English practical ability and communicative competence can be achieved through effective teaching (Dong, 2016). In traditional courses, there are plenty of factors affecting the effectiveness of teaching, such as course objectives, learning enthusiasm, teachers' theoretical and practical ability, teaching process, and teaching software and hardware resources (Liu, 2021). These factors need to be considered to improve the effectiveness of teaching. Blended learning is an important means to help students achieve predetermined learning goals (Doug, 2013). Verma et al. (2010) also pointed out that blended learning must be well combined with teaching equipment, tools, and multimedia and be organized efficiently with textbooks to achieve the teaching goals in the most optimized way. Furthermore, blended learning, in his opinion, is developed based on e-learning and face-to-face learning, or the upgrade and development of online learning. Watson (2008) listed examples of 10 K-12 schools combining online and face-to-face education in the United States, in which blended learning was used as one possible way to solve problems in traditional teaching and learning methods. Hoic and Mormar (2009) believed that the teaching design of blended learning should be carried out from the perspective of learners and teachers, and the opinions of their learners should be valued by their managers. Gede et al. (2018) argued that although different educational technologies were used in traditional education to improve learning efficiency, the application of web-based activities in the classroom was needed to maximize students' English language skills.

By applying the blended learning, teachers have more time to construct, organize, and promote advanced and effective teaching plans in a text, including understanding, structure, key sentences, and applied writing. However, the application of a blended learning approach to promote learners' English language abilities is still a lack in educational theories. Few people focus on the effectiveness of English teaching in colleges or use Unipus, a popular online platform in China, to combine the Internet with traditional teaching. The research on the effectiveness of blended learning on private college students is meaningful and enlightening for other colleges and future teaching.

In addition, the theory of using a blended learning approach to promote learners' abilities in the English language still lacks the support of practical cases. Thus, this study pays more attention to learners themselves, which corresponds to the learner-centered learning concept. Using the combined advantages of instruction, online learning, and collaborative learning, we employed a blended learning model with online and offline courses to explore the



effectiveness in improving learners' reading, listening, speaking, writing, and translation skills. Some available results have demonstrated its benefits in enhancing learners' learning engagement and language abilities.

A blended learning+Unipus teaching method was adopted among some freshmen for a whole semester. The teaching effectiveness under such an approach has been analyzed to testify whether students' achievements and self-study abilities have been improved. The teaching effectiveness was examined in this study through data and students' reactions using both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

To achieve effective outcomes, it is necessary to improve the teaching means of blended learning, develop pedagogical support, and formulate effective course syllabuses. According to "*College English Curriculum Guidelines*" released by the Ministry of Education in 2020, College English, a required basic course for undergraduates, aims to improve students' abilities like self-learning and trans-cultural communication, and language abilities, such as listening, reading, speaking, writing, and translation. Modern information technology and blended learning methods are recommended to enhance students' self-learning. Therefore, the combination of Unipus and face-to-face teaching is applied to meet the needs of national curriculum guidelines to realize the utmost learning effectiveness. The syllabus model of this pilot case study was specified under the guide of the Input and Output Model.

Karasen (1981) put forward the monitor model, in which the Input Hypothesis Model was the core part of Karasen's second language acquisition theory. He emphasized that learners should pay much attention to "acquisition", i.e., subconscious language acquisition in the language environment and the realization of comprehensible input. He explained that, with the formula of  $i+1$ , the input of language information should not be too difficult or too easy. " $i$ " represents the current language level of the learner, and "+1" refers to the level that the learner should reach in the next step. Different students have different learning abilities and levels. Therefore, for teachers, arranging supplementary materials before class will not only provide students with a certain learning environment so that students of different levels can adapt to the study of textbooks and materials but also broaden their knowledge categories. Karasen's theory places too much emphasis on the importance of comprehensible input language.

Swain (1985) put forward the “Language Output Hypothesis”, which emphasizes the use of language and the understanding of the target language. In teaching, instructors should provide more time and opportunities to encourage students to think, express, discuss, and practice. Students’ learning situations can be detected through the output effects of various activities.

According to the input-output theory of Karasen and Swing, we designed the blended language learning model of the course syllabus in this case study. The model is shown in Figure 1. After analyzing the content and learners, the instructor applied suitable teaching methods to input. Then, teaching output was evaluated through exercises and class performance. The instructor would revise teaching procedures if the output was not ideal.

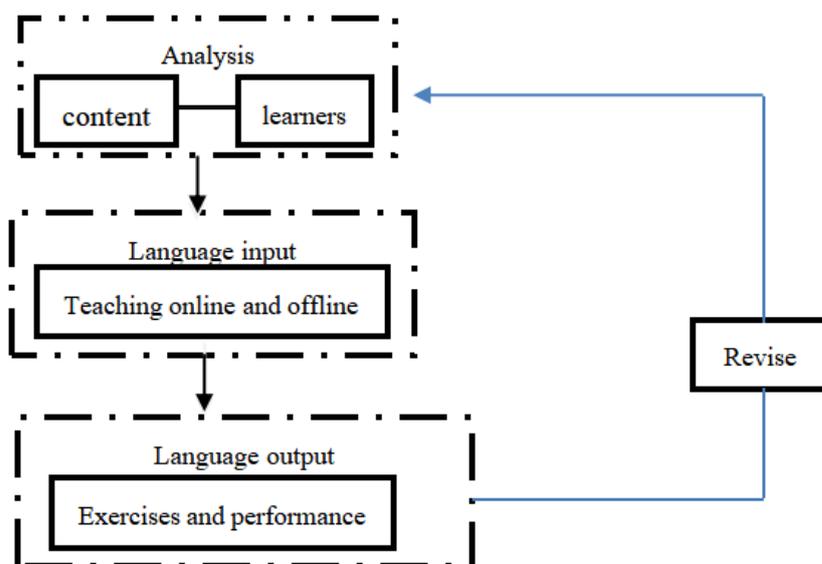


Figure 1: Blended Learning Model Based on Input-output Theory

Students’ performances represent a key aspect of teaching effectiveness (Jane, 1997). Therefore, students’ daily performance, including involvement or participation in class, final performances in tests, academic activities of listening, writing, reading, and translation, and attitudes towards Unipus, was examined in this study.

Students were originally divided into different classes according to their national examination scores. Two top classes were chosen as the number of students was the same, and both were in Class One of different majors. As the College English examination differed from the National College Entrance Examination, these students’ first final English exam



scores were used as pretext data to ensure their language abilities were close, including listening, reading, writing, and translation. If their score significance is over 0.05 in SPSS, these students' language abilities are alike. Otherwise, the instructor would select other students to participate. Two different teaching pedagogies were applied to experimental and control groups of students.

Their first exam score significance in SPSS was over 0.05. Then, the designed blended learning approach was applied in the experimental group, while the conventional teaching method was applied in the control group in the following semester. Later, the performances of students in both groups in class and exams were analyzed via qualitative and quantitative analysis to reveal the teaching effectiveness.

#### **4. Methods**

In order to select a proper and useful technological platform, we analyzed the pros and cons of several software or platforms, including Unipus, SPOC, and MOOCs. Due to the unique feature of the English language and the designed textbook, it was quite convenient for students and their teachers to use Unipus. Unipus provides digital textbooks with a thorough explanation and numerous extra materials, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, Unipus has been proven to be useful and helpful.

Based on the blended learning model discussed above, detailed procedures were listed (see Figure 2). To realize satisfactory input and output, the instructor divided the whole teaching procedure into three parts: before class, in class, and after class. The instructor needs to analyze students and teaching contents to release relevant requirements and assignments with the help of the Unipus platform to let students learn words and text individually before the class. Students were required to display their learning outcomes via various activities. After knowing their learning outcomes, the instructor adapted the teaching method based on their performance. Later, exams and exercises were used as feedback on the teaching effect. If the results were not ideal, the instructor would revise the whole teaching details.

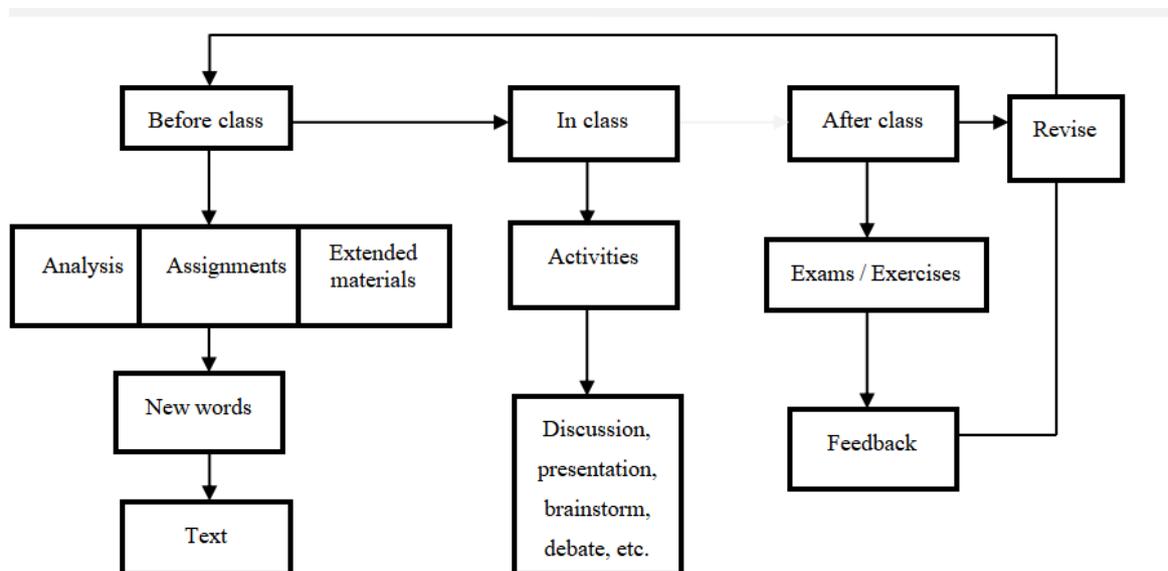


Figure 2: Blended Learning Procedures Based on Input-output Model

With a suitable learning platform and materials available, the whole teaching process was divided into three stages: before class, in class, and after class. Before the class, the instructor released assignments online to encourage students to preview and review via Unipus. For example, students could learn new words online by listening to their pronunciations and manage to remember them through reading examples and definitions of the words. Later, students could browse the words marked in blue in the text. In addition, all complex and long sentences were expressed in simpler English with illustrating examples to help students further understand the text. As for those struggling in their English course, there was also the translation version to help them understand the text and language points. Apart from the materials given on Unipus, more materials can be uploaded to help students learn faster and cultivate their critical thinking and abilities. After thorough learning before class, students could be well prepared for class activities because they knew their confusion and were willing to find satisfactory solutions.

In class, face-to-face teaching in the experimental group was different from that in the traditional one. The instructor applied a new teaching model, combining face-to-face with Unipus online platform. A sound preparation before the class enabled students to demonstrate what they had learned. In addition to regular teaching, the instructor needed to change teaching designs based on the feedback about the effectiveness of the students' online learning practices so that they could further improve their class presentations. Furthermore, students' outcomes were much emphasized through questions, discussions, presentations, and exercises to testify to their learning progress and to push them to start to solve questions themselves.

After class, students' learning efficiency was tested in the form of questions collected from the Unipus database containing adequate exercises or uploaded by teachers. Additionally, exams were important for examining students' learning outcomes and effectiveness. After knowing the result, the instructor could repeat key points to help students solve their problems and questions.

## 5. Results

Quantitative and qualitative analyses were applied to analyze the effectiveness of the blended learning+Unipus in the experimental group and that of the previous teaching method in the control group. Pre- and post-training evaluation scores taken from the first exam revealed the teaching effectiveness. In addition, routine tests and class performance were taken as references in qualitative analysis.

Two different classes were named 1 (experimental group) and 2 (control group). "Before" refers to before the experiment. "After" refers to the second final English exam. Their exam scores were analysed in the SPSS.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Two Group Students' Exams**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
after1	43	64	95	81.35	6.831
before1	43	55	94	75.67	9.306
after2	43	56	93	77.79	9.190
before2	43	52	88	74.65	8.742
Valid N (listwise)	43				

Table 1 shows that the first exam performance of the students in two groups is nearly close to each other. From the analysis of their scores, the scores in the experimental group: maximum score is 94, minimum score 55, average 75.67; the scores in the control group: maximum score is 88, minimum score 52, average 74.65. The mean score of the experimental group has been increased from 75.67 to 81.35, with its minimum score from 55 to 64 and the maximum one from 94 to 95, while the mean score in the control group has been increased from 74.65 to 77.79, with the minimum from 52 to 56, and the maximum from 88 to 93. These data show that this teaching mode is practical and effective.

SPSS analysis was conducted to explore whether the abilities of the two groups were close at the beginning and were different after the experiment. The independent samples tests were respectively applied to verify their performance.

**Table 2: Statistics of Independent Samples Test of Two Groups' First Exam (before)**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
before12	Equal variances assumed	.597	.442	.526	84	.601	1.023	1.947	-2.849	4.895
	Equal variances not assumed			.526	83.674	.601	1.023	1.947	-2.849	4.896

**Table 3: Statistics of Independent Samples Test of Two Groups' Second Exam (after)**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
after12	Equal variances assumed	5.250	.024	2.038	84	.045	3.558	1.746	.086	7.031
	Equal variances not assumed			2.038	77.556	.045	3.558	1.746	.081	7.035

Independent Samples Test was applied to ensure whether their scores were relevant just in case the basic statistics were similar while their abilities were not alike. Table 2 above shows  $p=0.601 > 0.05$  ( $p > 0.05$  indicates that students' performances in the two groups are similar; otherwise, their scores are irrelevant and unsuitable for research). Therefore, students in both groups are qualified to be selected as the experimental and control groups to verify their learning performance in this case study. Table 3 shows  $p=0.045 < 0.05$ . The results mean the mean scores of the two groups in this case study differ from each other, or one group performs differently from the other. To verify the learning effectiveness of the experimental group, the test of paired samples was put into use to examine which group had made distinct progress after a semester's learning.

**Table 4: Paired Samples Test of Each Group's Exams.**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	before1 - after1	-5.674	12.313	1.878	-9.464	-1.885	-3.022	42	.004
Pair 2	before2 - after2	-3.140	12.266	1.871	-6.914	.635	-1.678	42	.101

The analysis of the scores before and after the exams through the paired sample test shows  $p=0.04 < 0.05$  in the experimental group. The result means that the performances of students



in the experimental group in the second exam are better. The statistics of the control group, however, were quite different ( $p=1.01>0.05$ ), meaning almost no difference between the two exams. Therefore, we could get a rough conclusion that this blended learning based on Unipus is workable and efficient.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Analysis from students' perspectives

First, this blended learning+Unipus promotes students' learning confidence. In the beginning, students in the experimental group felt stressed more or less as there were many strange words, which took them a while to adapt. In contrast, students in the control group performed a little better in daily tests and assignments. Over time, however, the experimental group was getting positive. An increasing number of students could complete their learning tasks as required. Although a few students with weak self-discipline had difficulties keeping up, they gradually regained their confidence in learning and performed better in classroom activities and exams.

With the help of Unipus and through pre-assigned tasks, students were aware of teaching contents and procedures, which enabled them to prepare well for learning. They were more energetic and active in class performances a week later. For instance, when it was time to learn a narrative text entitled "Cliff Yang" (Unit 3 in Book One of *New Horizon College English*), the instructor assigned class presentation homework one week in advance, requiring students to tell interesting stories about Cliff Yang in class. In class, most of the students in the experimental group raised their hands vigorously, and some added words or adapted the text into a more enjoyable and interesting script. Their performances earned themselves applauses in class. In such classroom activities, they could not only learn and understand more about the text by themselves but also have opportunities to practice their oral English. Even those reluctant to participate in the activities performed better than before, sometimes vividly and fluently.

Second, this blended learning+Unipus promotes students' self-learning and enhances their critical thinking ability. Language learning activities in traditional teaching mode give students less time to express themselves. Teachers are obliged to teach rather than solve students' questions. Students are also reluctant to learn by themselves, and their progress cannot be observed by teachers and by themselves. In traditional teaching, teachers in the



class spout lectures, or rather spoon-feed students, a wealth of knowledge, and they are not sure how much their students have gained or mastered. Therefore, dictation, test, Q&A, etc., were used to examine the students' outcomes. Additionally, it is hard to supervise the students' learning outside of class. This blended learning+Unipus, however, encourages students to learn on their own first instead of relying too much on their teachers. In this way, students can build a self-learning sense without supervision from anyone. Their learning procedures can be recorded by platform, making it easy for teachers to follow. In addition, during their self-learning, they have adequate time to think carefully or boost their in-depth critical thinking (Cheung & Hew, 2011).

A surface level of critical thinking for students is that they can draw conclusions and judgments without providing the reason why they think so because, most of the time, they do not have enough time or effort to think or reflect. After training, most of them can independently and critically state the pros and cons of things, how they draw their conclusions, and how to make judgments and suggestions.

## **7.2 Analysis from the instructor's perspective**

This blended learning+Unipus teaching method enables the instructor to better design their classrooms. In the traditional classroom, English teachers spend more time on cramming activities, mainly explaining words, phrases, meanings, and exercises. Most students, especially those with poor language skills, find it difficult to keep up in class, let alone digest what is being taught. If students are allowed to know their accurate and detailed class guidelines and preview the learning materials before class, they will spend time preparing, understanding, and thinking. In this way, the teacher is a member of the classroom activities or its organizer and participant. Teaching is no longer a kind of dictatorial and inefficient lecture hall.

This blended learning+Unipus promotes the instructor's evaluation of his or her teaching and students, which is essential to the teaching procedures. A sound and reasonable evaluation of students and class can perfect teaching procedures and improve its effects. Although summative evaluation is an important factor in acquainting the instructor with students' learning effects, it is not enough to evaluate students' language performance. Formative evaluation is necessary to assist the instructor in better familiarizing his students' learning outcomes and releasing reasonable and workable missions. Compared with traditional teaching, this new method makes it possible to focus more on students'



performance than sole knowledge teaching. In addition, the instructor may directly know students' ability improvement.

## **8. Conclusion**

The paper delves into blended learning with the Unipus-supporting method. The study is not only reliable by applying qualitative and quantitative research methods but also meaningful for instructors, professors, educators, etc. The success of this new teaching method, Unipus-supporting blended learning, is reflected in the increase in students' scores. This method is also workable to improve the learning outcomes in language education according to their scores and class performance. In addition, students in the experimental group are more active and confident than those in the control group since they need more time to prepare, recognize their weaknesses, bravely express questions in class and solve some problems step by step by themselves or under the instructor's guidance. This new teaching mode realizes the optimization of the learning environment, helping students perform better in their language study process. Blended learning has been proven useful and effective in many courses. However, few blended learning studies have been carried out on College English using a Quasi-experimental design with statistical control instead of the questionnaire. This study may pave a solid foundation for the effectiveness of blended learning in College English teaching.



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