



White Paper

Commercial and pedagogical benefits of a
Web 2.0 based blended learning platform

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explain the commercial and pedagogical benefits of blended learning as delivered by the **English360** platform and how it gives language schools and their clients a competitive edge.

Before we continue, let's explain what we mean by **blended learning**. This is a term that refers to the way in which language training is delivered. According to Pete Sharma, in his book on the subject¹, blended learning is the combination of the face-to-face part of a course and the "appropriate use of technology". Generally, this is interpreted to mean a combination of self-access and teacher-led instruction.

The online components of a blended learning programme – typically interactive learning materials and reference tools such as dictionaries – increasingly tend to be delivered through a virtual learning environment (VLE). These enable appropriate course programmes to be constructed and delivered to the individual learner, and learner performance to be monitored. VLEs fall into two main categories:

- **Externally-hosted platforms**

A school or institution exports content to the externally-hosted platform (e.g., the proprietary Web Course Tools, or the open source Moodle). These are essentially "empty boxes" which need filling with content which has either been lifted from the web or built by the teacher concerned with course design and programme delivery. Though flexible and allowing for complete content customisation, teachers are faced with the daunting task of constructing the entire course content database themselves.

- **Content-supplied, course-managed learning platforms**

These tend to perform the same basic functions as an externally hosted VLE, but are sold commercially and are pre-filled with content. The main disadvantage is that teachers, while being able to have some say in the design of actual courses, have no opportunity to upload their own specialist materials to the system.

Some teachers commonly use digital tools such as YouTube, podcasts, wikis and blogs in the classroom to provide multimedia component to the course.

Content-supplied platforms can be used to supplement or fully integrate with face-to-face classes using the course material they offer.

Taking the content-supplied platform one step further and understanding the way in which teachers work, **English360** has been developed to provide teachers with critical elements that they require to deliver blended learning options:

- Digital authoring tools to support flexible course design. Teachers can combine their own materials and material from the web with publisher coursebook content.
- The ability to add and adapt authentic content to enable learners to learn English in the context of their specific workplace goals.
- Community features such as forums and messaging, which boost motivation and autonomous learning, and offer increased opportunities for communication.

Let's start by considering the pedagogical benefits of personalisation in English Language Teaching.

2. The need for personalisation

In today's highly competitive globalised market, English is the language of international trade and a growing number of organisations require their workforces to be proficient in business English (BE).

In a global business community, it is vital that people communicate effectively to achieve workplace goals. Typical communication tasks common to most BE learners include:

- Presentations
- Negotiations
- Telephoning
- Writing reports and business letters
- Taking part in meetings or trade shows
- Entertaining clients
- Explaining technical processes

Every industry – law, medicine, engineering, finance, media or marketing to name just a few – clearly has its own terminology, vocabulary and phraseology. Building on the need for business English training is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) where training is highly relevant for the learner – for the job they are doing and the sector they are in. This may involve negotiating an engineering contract with an important overseas client or working closely with other lawyers from a branch in a different country or presenting the outcome of medical research to a foreign counterpart. **English360** believes that all English language teaching is essentially ESP, since each learner has unique learning needs.

The critical first step in developing any personalised training is needs analysis. **English360** provides a digital needs analysis tool that captures each learner's requirements in the form of tags. Each tag is weighted to indicate the learner's perceived level of need in that area, ensuring the teacher can accurately reflect those needs in the teaching materials they include in their course, supplemented with relevant authentic content.

3. Benefits of blended learning

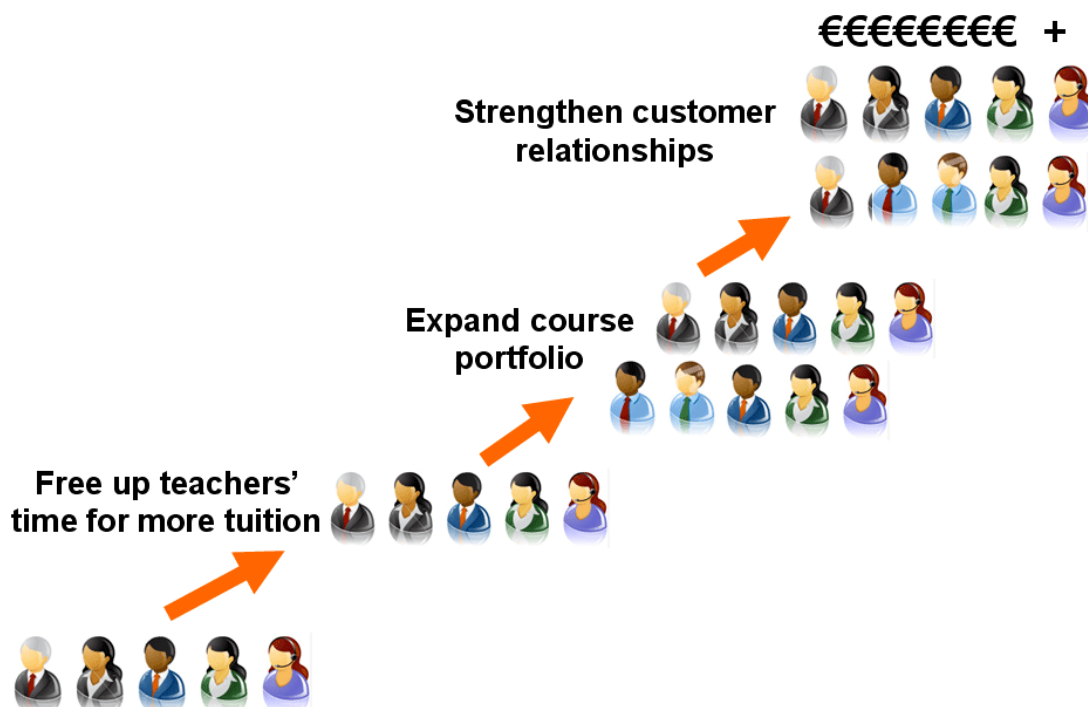
Blended learning does not replace the teacher, instead it empowers teachers to be more productive and, by providing a more personalised service to their clients, to help learners achieve their real-life goals.

Here are the key reasons why blended learning is becoming increasingly widely used in language schools:

- **Competitive advantage**
A blended learning solution positions a school very much at the forefront of language training. The web-based platform enables training to be easily tailored to clients' needs and for this to be delivered in a more flexible way through an

'any time, anywhere' approach.

- **Reduces costs and boosts training ROI**
Digital authoring tools reduce the time it takes to create personalised courses and once created, they can be adapted for further use. This reduces the cost of course creation and boosts the return on investment of a training programme.
- **Enables the extension of the portfolio of courses**
As this makes course production more cost effective, schools can invest in extending the range and breadth of courses, thereby attracting learners from new market segments.
- **Extends the classroom**
Learning extends beyond the physical classroom allowing learners to complete tasks and revise topics at their own pace. While many exercises are automatically scored, there is teacher support to coach, review work, provide feedback, mark homework and monitor progress.
- **Strengthen customer relationships**
By providing personalised training relevant to learners' on the job requirements, schools deepen the relationship they have with their clients through increased customer satisfaction levels. Training can now be provided beyond the classroom, enabling schools to maintain their relationship once the face-to-face training is over, with the opportunity to provide further training remotely if required.



- **Allows schools to optimise classroom time and enrol more students**
Classroom time can be used to focus more fully on face-to-face communication skills or specific learner requirements (fluency, clarifying, consolidating, simulating workplace performance needs) and address any identified issues in more detail. This frees up time for teachers to deliver training to more students and grow student enrolment.

- **Flexible timetabling**

Courses can be scheduled to fit around learners' busy schedules. Learners log into **English360** at a time and place of their choice. For many business English learners, 100% face-to-face courses which take place in a classroom are impractical.

- **Boost motivation**

Digital authoring tools make it easy to add multi-media content – audio, video, animations – to courses so they are more engaging and motivating. Multi-media content also adds greater authenticity as highly relevant content can be selected for the learners' workplace and specific industry needs.

The allocation of course time spent in the classroom and time spent completing activities online is flexible. This decision can be taken jointly by language schools, HR departments and learners. The net result is that training becomes more effective.

4. Pedagogical perspective on **English360**

English360 supports pedagogic instructional design by providing:

- “Model” courses including quality-assured Cambridge University Press content already pre-loaded onto the platform
- Methodology for creating courses
- Self-authoring tools that enable teachers to create activities which have a real-world relevance
- The ability to create courses collaboratively with colleagues
- Communicative tools including discussion forums and an emailing system
- An avenue for the broader educator community to discuss best practice.

1. Flexible and fast course creation















English360 has started a revolution in the way that coursebooks are used by empowering teachers to take as much or as little from a wide range of Cambridge University Press activities and resources and combining this with their own materials to create highly personalised courses.

Business English and ESP teachers have been creating personalised courses for years with the help of a photocopier, glue and a pair of scissors and more recently including authentic resources from the web. But it's a time-consuming and often frustrating process for busy teachers who would prefer to spend their valuable time facilitating the learning path. **English360** with its web 2.0 digital authoring tools moves this process online facilitating e-learning and personalised eclectic course-design.

Teachers upload their own original materials and combine these with material from a library of over 9,000 activities and resources to create custom courses. Teachers have the flexibility to tailor course content for their learners, adding authentic resources from the web to make lessons relevant for learners.

Easy-to-use authoring tools

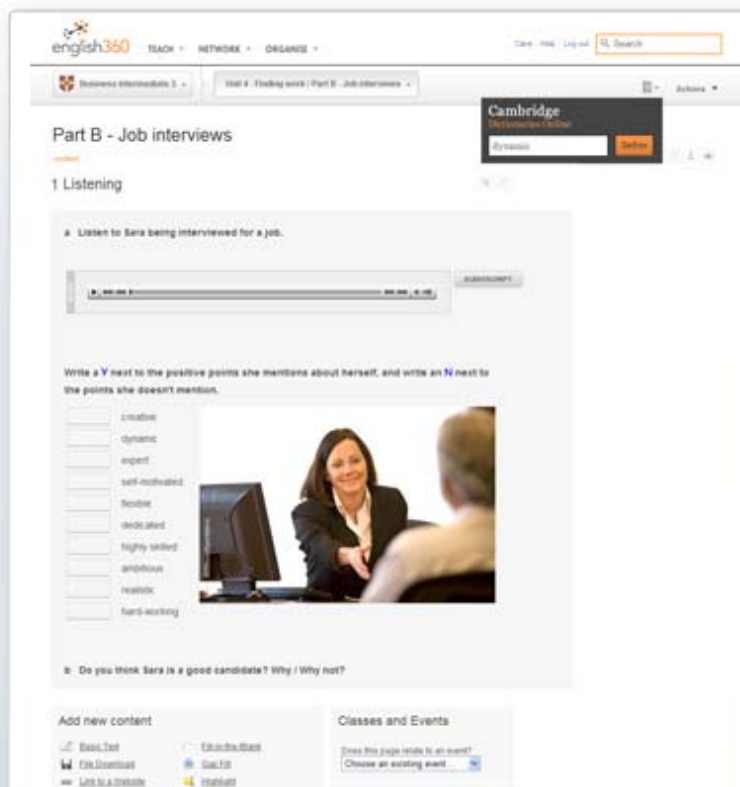
Add new content

- | | |
|--|---|
|  Basic Text |  Fill-in-the-Blank |
|  File Download |  Gap Fill |
|  Link to a Website |  Highlight |
|  Page Break |  Matching |
|  Viewable PDF |  Multiple Choice |
|  Categorise |  Needs Analysis |
|  Essay / Short Answer |  Reordering |

The Cambridge University Press ELT resources in **English360** can be used in one of two main ways – as web-based versions of the books (currently 33 as of July 2010), or to mix and match by selecting pages or activities from different Cambridge books.

All the resources are tagged so teachers can search by topic or level for the material they need quickly and easily. As **English360** is an open platform, the tagged content can be re-ordered and re-used as required.

Create client specific courses



The screenshot displays the English360 web interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'english360' logo, 'TEACH', 'NETWORK', and 'ORGANISE' menus, along with 'Home', 'Help', 'Logout', and a search box. Below this, the current course is identified as 'Business Intermediate 3' and the specific activity as 'Unit 4 - Finding work / Part B - Job interviews'. The main content area is titled 'Part B - Job interviews' and contains a '1 Listening' section. The listening task is 'a Listen to Sara being interviewed for a job.' Below the audio player, there is a task instruction: 'Write a Y next to the positive points she mentions about herself, and write an N next to the points she doesn't mention.' A list of adjectives is provided for marking: creative, dynamic, expert, self-motivated, flexible, dedicated, highly skilled, ambitious, realistic, and hard-working. An image of Sara in an interview is shown. At the bottom of the page, there are two sidebars: 'Add new content' with icons for Basic Text, File Download, Link to a Website, Fill-in-the-Blank, Gap Fill, and Highlight; and 'Classes and Events' with a search box and a 'Choose an existing event' dropdown.

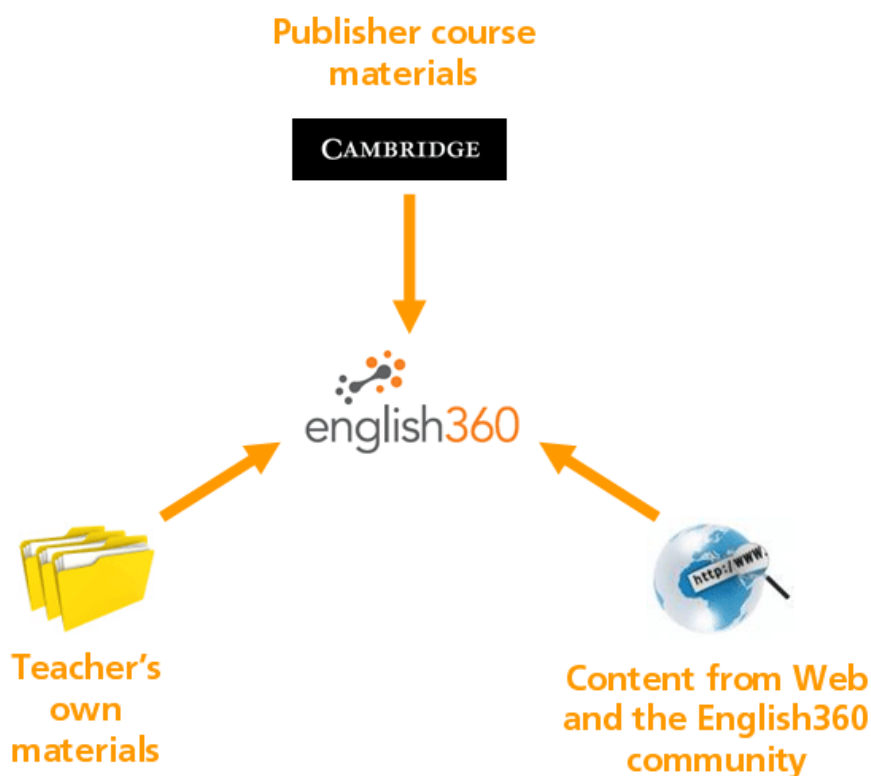
The teacher's newly created digital course can be printed out for use in the classroom or used as a blended course where learners can work on in their own time and consolidate their learning. Teachers can also provide students with follow-up work and revision materials – carefully selected multimedia content provides direction for extra self-study, consolidation activities and further informal learning opportunities.

Schools can choose to keep courses private or make school material available to educators within the school to be adapted and re-used as needed.

2. Personalised study plans

To create personalised study plans that today's business English learners expect, the books are just one of three sources of input. The Cambridge University Press content provides a structure for learners to follow with graded content suitable for the learners' level and a full syllabus that covers language skills and language systems.

Text books are frequently supplemented to create a course that is relevant to the learning styles and work related goals of learners. Educators are aware that material devised for a global market cannot easily accommodate local – and personal – needs and interests. To address this, teachers can add their own original content – lesson plans, activities and resources. They add authentic resources – documents, press clippings, audio and videos from the web. The net result are course 'playlists' which can be re-arranged and supplemented with further material as required.



Taking this one step further, learners themselves can upload content to provide the right context for their performance tasks – workplace goals set at the outset of the

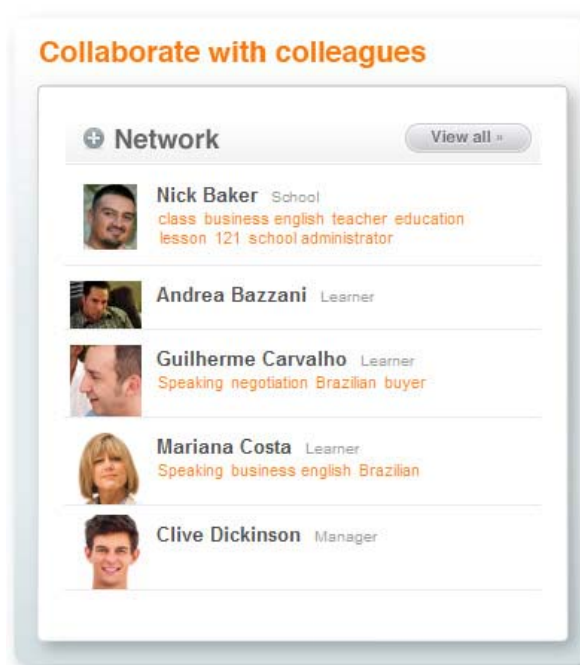
training programme and refined over time. Authenticity is a critical success factor for schools.

“With **English360**, students find learning an engaging and motivating experience. Authenticity is vital so being able to provide our aviation clients with courses that are highly focused, authentic and effective is an important benefit from using **English360**.”

Jon Crocker, Principal of OISE Bristol

3. Collaborative tools

The **English360** web-based platform is based on web 2.0 principles of collaboration and social networking. Directors of studies and school owners can opt for the public version of **English360** or their own version ring-fenced to their own school. The public version provides multiple channels of communication, supporting informal learning in the form of peer to peer exchanges and enhanced dialogues for all members of a learning group.



Teachers share ideas and resources including courses with other colleagues in their school or others in their “network” of contacts. They can meet like-minded people on the **English360** Forums to share best practice and discuss pedagogical methods.

“It is the development of a workforce that can create curricula, find appropriate sources and link to other experts, peers and learners that is at the heart of delivering a new approach to teaching,” says Futurelab in its report Digital Futures².

5. Increasing customer acquisition

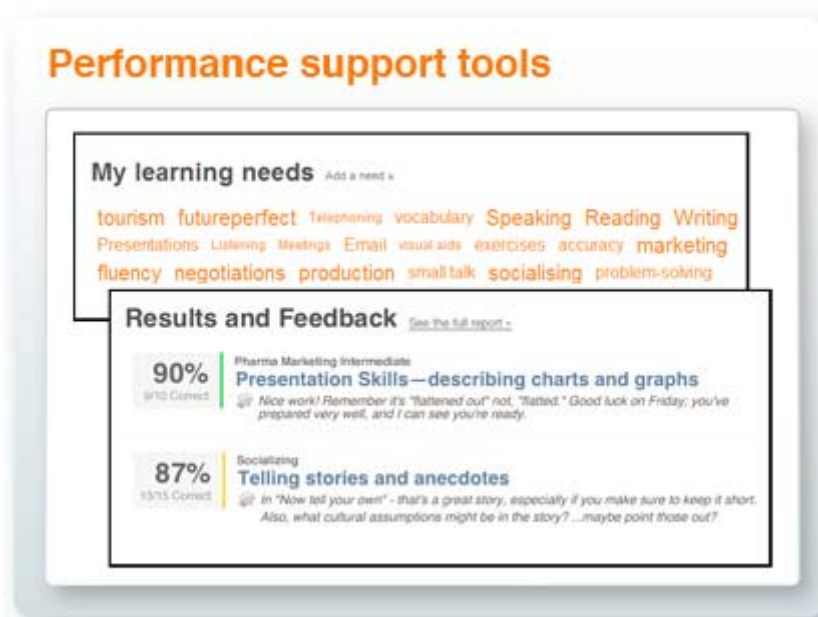
Expanding on Section 3 “Benefits of blended learning” on deepening customer relationships, here we review how **English360** boosts training satisfaction and increases customer acquisition.

1. Focused training

Powerful needs assessment tools identify learners’ specific requirements, taking into account workplace tasks that need to be done in English. Requirements could be communication skills used in a particular industry or language needs to meet specific learning goals.

The learner completes a needs analysis, which has been custom-created from a template which automatically generates need tags weighted according to importance indicated by the learner. The needs tags are aggregated to help the teacher identify requirements for each learning group and provide relevant input to ensure the course is applicable and motivating.

English360 is learner-driven creating a learning environment that acknowledges the importance of self-pacing, task review training consolidation where appropriate. For example, students can log onto the platform and listen again to an audio track used in class, promoting learner autonomy and ownership (the learner decides when to pause or redo an activity).



As each learner goes through the training programme, tools measure learner progress, providing immediate feedback to each learner, and enabling teachers to review how they are doing against task-specific assessments. Performance events are set up which identify milestones in the training programme, helping ensure training is on-track to addressing learner’s workplace goals.

2. Appropriate content

English360 contains over 9,000 activities and resources taken from 35 quality-assured Cambridge University Press books. Each of these is tagged so teachers can search by topic or level for the material they need. For example, topics within the skills and functions group include: applying for jobs, arranging travel, dealing with clients, dealing with problems, giving instructions, making enquiries, meetings, socialising, telephoning and writing reports

The content can then be matched against work areas, for example: aviation, catering, customer services, engineering, financial services, health and safety, human resources (HR), IT, job-hunting, legal, logistics, maritime, marketing, media, medicine, sales, technology and tourism.

Authenticity is further boosted by including the company's own materials such as contracts and reports in the training programmes.

3. Learning styles

The web-based platform supports different learning styles more efficiently than would be possible in class. Certain learners can be provided with extra support and tuition via exercises and repeat sessions. In-class work can be recorded and then uploaded into **English360** so learners can hear the lesson again and reinforce their learning.

6. Support

A blended learning platform offers great benefits in terms of collaborative instructional design across teams so **English360** provides the necessary training to ensure teachers realise the full potential of the platform. Staff can come to your site and provide presentations and workshops. This can be followed up by online tutorials and technical support is provided by email, Skype or telephone as required.

With the platform, there is support for school management to make common admin tasks easy. These include:

- Scheduling of classes and at-a-glance view of teachers and learners calendars
- Grading of homework from automatically scored activities
- Attendance reporting and monitoring completion of online tasks
- Feedback on progress so far including performance events
- Administrator panel controls who's invited to the **English360** platform as teachers and learners.

7. FAQs

Do I need technical resources to get up and running?

We deal with the hosting and the headaches. If you can attach a document to an email then you will be able to create your course and use the platform.

Will our clients find the online platform too complicated to use?

In our experience, professionals who need to learn English as part of their jobs work on computers everyday and navigating around web-based systems. They will find English360 intuitive to use as it uses common web paradigms.

How is *English360* different from other virtual learning environments?

It brings together self-authoring tools, quality course materials and web 2.0 community features. The learning platform can easily be branded with your school logo and combines with Cambridge University Press content that can be re-sequenced. You use our digital tools to create your personalised courses, with total control over the level of privacy for your courses.

Is it expensive to get started?

English360 is a pay-as-you-go service; there is no need to pay set-up and hosting fees. All teacher accounts are free, and teacher training is included. An institution account requires a minimum commitment of ten students (€90) per month with a contract term of one year. For more than 10 students, the cost per student varies by volume. The **English360** platform is considerably cheaper than creating your own learning platform, with your own logo.

Can I generate extra revenue by incorporating *English360* into my course?

Certainly, in much the same way you earn money teaching or authoring. The platform can generate income for you as you provide blended and distance learning. You can charge learners to access your course and embed this cost in your course fees.

Freelance teachers can make their authored materials available to the wider **English360** community and get a proportion of the revenue shared out to contributors.

How to get started

1. Contact **English360** for an on-site presentation or workshop
2. Register at www.english360.com
3. Set up the branded platform for your school
4. Invite staff – admin/teachers
5. Teachers create courses and invite students
6. Students log in (off your school website)

At every step of the way there's support, online tutorials and training on the platform to make sure **English360** delivers what you need at www.english360.com

Phone support, workshops and face-to-face training is also available.

References

1. Barrett, B and Sharma, P (2007) Blended Learning – using technology inside and beyond the language classroom. Macmillan
2. Education futures, teachers and technology, Dan Sutch, April 2010. More at www.futurelab.org.uk/resources.