The pains and gains of using blended learning in ESP classroom - finding a balance between the efficiency and the inevitability

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to provide some insights into the challenges of using modern technology, particularly blended learning, in the ESP classroom and to discuss the question which ESP teachers are frequently confronted with these days of how to find a balance between the efficiency of LSP instruction and the inevitability of the fact that, since modern technology is present in every aspect of our students' daily lives, it cannot be ignored by us, their teachers, either.

In view of these issues an in-depth analysis of blended learning's usage in ESP classroom is given. First, the origins and definitions of blended learning are provided, followed by the methods and suggestions for its implementation into the course curriculum. Then a research study conducted among law students and teachers of Legal English is presented which aimed to investigate how both groups perceive the efficiency of this method in the process of ESP learning / teaching and to examine whether and to what extent blended learning utilized in the classroom contributes to delivering better teaching results. The example from the Białystok Legal English Centre, Faculty of Law, University of Białystok, Poland, provides specific case background for the aforementioned analysis.

Keywords: blended learning, efficiency, ESP, modern technology;

1. Introduction

The term *blended learning* originated in the business world in connection with corporate training and was then implemented in the higher education sector. In fact it is not a wholly new approach to teaching and learning, but it rather shows the inclusion of (computer) technology (with online and offline activities and materials) in the classroom (Georgio-Godeo, 2005; Banados, 2006; MacDonald, 2006; Sharma & Barrett, 2007; Whittaker, 2013).

This mode of studying was introduced because it is attractive to the stakeholders in the context of the limited class time allocated for the course content. In addition, the materials might be individually tailored, and the investments the companies have already made in re-usable training recourses exploited. Apart from that, blended learning enables teachers and students to match learning styles which might improve the learning rate (Sparrow, 2004:5).

There are numerous scholars who claim that the term blended learning is difficult to define (Kerres & de Witt, 2003; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005; Sharpe et al. 2006; MacDonald, 2006; Sharma & Barrett, 2007), and it may mean different things for various academics, which is best reflected in the taxonomy of terms related to blended learning provided by Gruba & Hinkelman (2012:4), who attempt to differentiate the terms related to blended learning by percentages.

Term	Definition
web-enhanced	subjects that make use of a minimal amount of online materials, such as posting a syllabus and course announcements
blended	subjects that utilise some significant online activities in otherwise face-to-face learning, but less than 45%
hybrid	subjects in which online activities replace 45-80% of face-to-face class meetings
fully online	subjects in which 80% or more of learning materials are conducted online

Table 1. Gruba & Hinkelman's taxonomy of blended learning terms (2012:4)

Nevertheless, the definition provided by Banados (2006:534) seems to be the most complete. She claims that blended learning is a method which combines technology and classroom instruction in a flexible way which 'recognises the benefits of delivering some training and assessment online but also uses other modes to make up a complete training programme which can improve learning outcomes and/or save costs'. It is worth highlighting [drawing on Sharma & Barrett's approach (2007:70)] that this definition does not restrict the technology to only information technology and covers unlimited technological resources and devices (like Internet resources, interactive whiteboards, mobile phones, skype, podcasts, webinars, e-learning and online platforms, creating forums or discussions boards) which may both facilitate and hinder the process of instruction.

2. Course Design and Implementation

The variety of options and the fact that our students are increasingly technology dependent in their daily lives make blended learning look attractive, but for us, teachers and course designers it may be challenging and burdensome as there are little or no guidelines how to approach blended learning course design. In that vein the approach presented by Whittaker (2013) might be of some help. She highlights four aspects that need to be taken into consideration in that process i.e. context, course design itself, stakeholders (learners, teachers and tutors), as well as evaluations of the blend.

2.1. Context

Before designing the course it is important to consider the teaching and learning context i.e. to identify the reasons for implementing blended learning course and to determine what the limiting factors to the design will be.

Many scholars (Dewar & Whittington, 2004; Graham, 2004:7; Sharma & Barrett, 2007; Hockly, 2011:58; Eydelman, 2013; Pardo-Gonzales, 2013; Fleet, 2013) highlight that blended learning can undoubtedly bring real gains in the classroom due to:

- ‘pedagogical richness’ of the mode (Marsh et al, 2003) defined as a variety of different pedagogical approaches that can be included in a blend;

- the convenience of the mode – the courses are available 24/7; hence, students can study when they want and at the pace they feel comfortable with;

- increased learner's autonomy;

- increased access and flexibility which facilitates teaching language to large groups of students as well as increases the market reach of the course;

- increased cost effectiveness as well as improved learning effectiveness as learning objectives might be obtained quicker;

- the attractiveness of the mode in today's world when young people are technology dependent and expect technology to be integrated into their language classes;

- optimised development cost and time, which may save a lot of teachers' time as well as the environment (e.g. no more copying loads of handouts or automatic test checking);

In the ESP context specifically, due to blended learning the course might be localised and individualised. As Tomlinson (2013:185) puts it *"each course at a centre can benefit from a common store of language and activity input but can be tailor-made for specific clients, specific client courses and specific time allocations and, as a course develops it can be modified to allow individuals to work at their own pace and in relation to their preferred learning styles, time available, needs, wants, problems and interests".*

However, despite the aforementioned advantages, there are some limiting factors which need to be taken into account as well (Eydelman, 2013; Peachey, 2013; Whittaker, 2013). First of all, we cannot ignore the importance of the technical and financial aspects and restrictions which include high costs of the software and its maintenance, no internet connections or the question of sustainability of the solution if there is limited or no financial support from the stakeholders. As far as the pedagogy is concerned, apart from a lack of guidelines on the principles and practicalities of blended course design, which was mentioned before, it might be problematic to keep the students motivated and disciplined as extra workload is not always appreciated. Besides, working online requires more concentration, and the deadlines are frequently missed, not to mention the fact that we cannot be sure who in fact uses the device and does the task. Moreover, due to technical restrictions not all skills might be practised adequately and a time-saving measure might be a huge misconception, too. As Peachey (2013:70-71) claims *"the development and instructional design of the online part of the blended learning course can be extremely time-consuming and complex if you want to take the course beyond the delivery of simple downloadable documents. (...) many participants feel than an online tutor is available 24/7 and they do not have the limitations of 'class time' to restrict access to their tutor.* Finally, although blended learning is an invaluable tool in making the process of LSP instruction tailored to the students' particular needs, it often happens that complicated aspects are even more complicated when working online as students cannot obtain immediate help and feedback from the teacher, something that is available in the face-to-face instruction.

2.2. Course design

After examining the context, which apart from opportunities may pose problems as well, the course designers, as Whittaker (2013) suggests there is a need to decide the amount of the modes in the blended learning course i.e. how much time the learners will spend on each mode, which mode will set the pace, which mode will "lead" the course and how the modes will complement each other.

Neumeier (2005) remarks that it is essential to define the pedagogic purpose of the modes. Typically the F2F (face to face) mode is used to introduce the language or topic, whereas the online one is utilized to aid, reinforce and consolidate classroom instruction by practising and revising the skills and topics covered in the F2F lesson as well as to check understanding and supplement the F2F training. In this context it is important to draw attention to the terms introduced by (Neumeier, 2005) i.e. 'parallel' or 'isolated' incorporation. The first one means that both modes are used for teaching and learning (for example, the language item is presented in class and then practised using CALL), whereas the latter denotes that only one mode would be used, for example writing sessions could be restricted to the F2F mode. The majority of the blends appear to adopt a parallel approach.

Drawing on the above, the next step should be to decide on the methodology employed. Following Levy's remark (cited in Neumeier, 2005:172) it can be stated that the design and the specificity of the technological device affects the methodology used; hence, they can be limited and repetitive. In the F2F instruction, on the other hand, it is the teacher who determines the methodology and the variety of language teaching approaches and methods is greater; therefore, striking a balance between the modes is of crucial importance here.

Another issue to consider is the degree of learner's autonomy. The modes within a blend can either be optional or obligatory. Very often F2F mode is obligatory with optional online sub-modes or modes, which allows the student a degree of flexibility and autonomy. Also, as Fleet (2013) highlights, compulsory use of the online program might be one of the reasons for student discontent as extra online material could be perceived as a course extension rather than an integral part.

Finally, teachers should consider the timing based on their beliefs as to what the maximum amount of productive time could be spent on the computer or during the self-study and how the modes should be arranged in the timetable to make blended-learning most effective.

2.3. Stakeholders

While designing and implementing blended-learning course the roles and needs of various stakeholders need to be defined.

Some scholars (e.g. Eydelman, 2013; Fleet, 2013; Pardo-Gonzalez, 2013) reckon that a blended learning course leads to a shift towards a more learner-centred approach in which learners play a more active role as they have to take more decisions. The learners are expected to gain more autonomy in blended learning due to the fact that they have to take on different degrees of responsibility in the different modes. However, as it is pointed out by some academics (e.g. Benson, 2001; Stracke, 2007b; Corder & Waller, 2007) it does not automatically means autonomous learning as there is no necessary relationship between self-instruction and the development of autonomy. Besides, careful consideration needs to be given to the type of

learner and the teaching and learning environment. Also, an introductory session at the beginning of the course mainly to make students familiar with the blended learning approach and the type of tasks is of key importance.

For teachers / tutors adopting this approach means differing roles between the modes but in general they are similar to the those played in the F2F instruction. Nevertheless, it might be more time-consuming as many participants feel that an online tutor is available 24/7 as they do not have the limitations of 'class time'. Moreover, in blended learning the teachers and tutors may need as much support as their learners due to the fact that they may lack the computer skills their learners possess.

Finally, the role of the educational institution implementing this mode of language instruction in the curricula and the technical and financial support of its authorities should be taken into consideration as it guarantees the sustainability of the solutions adopted.

2.4. Evaluation

There are a number of areas of a blend that can be evaluated, which include the choice of software and materials, the balance of time spent in each mode, the stakeholders' attitudes toward the blend as well as the effectiveness in terms of teaching and learning.

As previously mentioned, improved learning effectiveness and cost effectiveness are considered to be important reasons for employing a blended approach. Nevertheless, as numerous scholars highlight (Dewar & Whittington, 2004:5), there is substantially less literature on the effectiveness of learning than there is defining it and suggesting how to implement it. As Whittaker (2013:19) underscores, the evidence appears to show that blended learning may improve student retention rates at a tertiary level, but there is little evidence available to suggest that blended learning is pedagogically effective despite the argument of 'improved pedagogy' which is cited as a reason for blending.

In that vein the research on the effectiveness of blended learning instruction conducted among law students and teachers of Legal English at the Faculty of Law, University of Białystok, Poland might shed some light on the issue in question.

3. **The effectiveness of blended learning instruction in the process of teaching / learning English for Legal Purposes (ELP)**

3.1. Purpose and context of the research

The study aimed to investigate how the law students and teachers of Legal English perceive the efficiency of blended learning approach in the process of ELP learning and to examine whether and to what extent blended learning utilized in the classroom contributes to delivering better teaching results.

The research was carried out at the University of Białystok among law students who attended obligatory ELP courses in the first year of the studies and teachers of Legal English at the same university. As an outcome of the EU-funded project, BLACKBOARD (e-learning educational platform) was introduced in 2010 at the university and with the administrative and technical support the teaching staff was highly encouraged to implement it in their courses (up to 50% of the teaching hours allocated to the course could take the form of online-based activities).

3.2. Research methodology

3.2.1. Research instruments and questions

The research project mainly assumed a qualitative methodology encompassing a questionnaire which focused on the effectiveness of the blended learning instruction, a semi-structured interview conducted among the teachers of Legal English working at the Faculty of Law, the University of Białystok and the analysis of the law students' learning progress.

The research questions were as follows:

- *How do you evaluate the effectiveness of BLACKBOARD and other IT methods for teaching Legal English?*

- *Is blended learning more effective (i.e. can you learn more and faster) than the traditional F2F method?*

- *Does the blended learning approach contribute to better teaching/learning results?*

The data essential to answering the research questions is both quantitative and qualitative in character. The questionnaire carried out among the law students and all the teachers provided quantitative and qualitative evidence. The teachers and students' reflections with reference to the issue in question were of a qualitative character, whereas the analysis of the law students' performance provided the data of quantitative nature.

3.2.2. Sample

Teachers

The sample encompassed 34 teachers working at the faculty of law, of this university. The research was conducted among 9 language specialists and 25 subject specialists. For the purpose of the research, it was assumed that a language specialist is an instructor teaching English to law students, whereas a subject specialist is an instructor teaching law in English.

All of the language specialists teach law students (mostly those in their first and second year of studies). Some (33%) also teach Legal English to legal professionals (judges and legal advisors) and occasionally to translators and academics. Aside from their teaching activities, 78% of the language specialists use Legal English in translation and court interpreting, and 55% of them use it for designing their teaching materials for classes with law students.

The language specialists are all experienced teachers of General English (the least experienced teacher has been teaching for 13 years and the most experienced for 24 years). As regards teaching English for Specific Purposes i.e. Legal English, the range of experience is wider (from 4–25 years) but teachers with fewer years of experience (4-12 years) preponderate. Mostly the language specialists have a degree in applied linguistics or English philology. Three of them hold a PhD degree in arts and one of them graduated both in English and in law.

27 subject specialists teach their subjects in English at the faculty of law. 25 of them participated in the research. Two of them, despite much effort taken by the researcher to contact them neither answered telephone calls nor emails. As far as experience in teaching law in their native

language is concerned, there is a huge diversity here. This research group encompassed both very experienced instructors (38 years of experience) and those who have just started their professional career (2 years of experience). Most of the subject specialists, however, possess relevant experience (13 years on average) in teaching their subject. The subject specialists have been instructing law in English for 6-7 years on average, but there are some teachers who have been giving lectures for over 14 years as well as those who have just started teaching law in English. All of the subject specialists possess a PhD degree in law and eight of them (32%) hold the title of Associate Professor (dr habilitowany).

All of the subject specialists teach their legal domain in English to international students who come to the faculty within their Erasmus mobility programs. The students are usually in their second, third or fourth years of studies.

Students

The sample encompassed 97 first year law students who participated in Legal English course at the Faculty of Law, University of Białystok in two consecutive academic years (2014/2015 and 2015/2016). 47 of the students attended blended learning course (30% of the classes took the form of online activities), whereas the remaining fifty participated in traditional, face to face classes. Both groups comprised students whose English was at the B2/C1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

3.3. Research results

3.3.1. Effectiveness of blended learning approach in the eyes of stakeholders

Teachers

The effectiveness of the blended learning method for ELP teaching was critically evaluated by the teachers of Legal English. As much as 37% of the respondents stated that it is not a good method and were quite sceptical about its effectiveness. They commented that although convenient for both students and teachers, the subject matter issues i.e. legal domains and problems are best discussed and explained during traditional classes where students can ask questions and develop their skills in legal reasoning. Moreover, they remark that this method may promote cheating as the teacher cannot be sure that their students do the allocated tasks by themselves without the help of others. In addition, the interviewed teachers highlight that not all students (especially part time students) are good at using technology, not to mention technical problems with the equipment and some disruptions of the internet connection. Finally, it was added that e-learning classes require an excess of preparation on the part of the teacher and self-discipline from students, which is not always forthcoming. Nevertheless, 35% of the teachers admitted that e-learning tools could serve as a good communication channel between students and teachers, a way of checking their knowledge as well as a valuable supplement to traditional classes owing to students' interests in new technologies. Only 19% of respondents stated that they use the method and find it either efficient or very efficient, whereas 10% of the teachers found its efficiency difficult to evaluate.

Students

Only 32% of the interviewed students evaluated the method as more effective than a traditional one. The following reasons and comments were provided to support the statement:

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- *it motivates students to work more regularly and frequently;*

- *this method can be effective but only as combined with the traditional one;*

- *there are no stressful moments so you can do and learn more;*

- *it is more adjusted to individual needs, abilities and learning strategies;*

- *it is very convenient - you study when you want;*

- *every student is forced to devote some time and energy to do the tasks, whereas in the classroom s/he may pretend that s/he listens to the teacher and simple switch off.*

However, a vast majority of the interviewed students (68%) did not find the method more effective than a traditional method of instruction. The following arguments and comments were provided:

- *we cannot be sure if we are doing the tasks correctly – it is not possible to see the mistakes (technical limitation of the software), and we cannot ask the teacher if we have questions or doubts;*

- *if I use traditional paper to write, I can highlight most important things, make extra notes and can have a look at that again, which is not possible with e-learning lessons;*

- *I appreciate classes with the teacher more; he/she explains more complicated issues, draws attention to some common mistakes and errors; we may ask the teacher questions if we don't understand something;*

- *Besides, if a person does not do an e-learning test s/he in fact misses the chance to learn some things; hence, his/her performance during examinations might be lower;*

- *people remember 'printed text' better than 'electronic' one; eyes get tired quicker with the electronic text;*

- *you need to have good Internet access, which is not always possible;*

- *some subject-matter issues can only be clarified by the teacher in the classroom;*

- *at the moment e-learning method is not more effective, but if the technology improves, it might be more effective;*

- *I like social interaction and prefer working with peers directly; e-learning is good for revising;*

- *we can practise effective communication better in the classroom, especially in the context of speaking;*

- *e-learning tests are stressful because of the time restrictions;*

- *I learn more during traditional classes.*

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3.3.2. Students' performance

The students who participated in the research project (i.e. both those who were instructed according to traditional and blended-learning approach) were tested on the knowledge they acquired at the same time and place and were asked to do exactly the same tests to check whether blended learning is more effective than traditional, classroom instruction.

In 2014-2015 academic year group 1 was instructed in the traditional way and covered 120 teaching hours, whereas in case of group 2, 30% of the classes (i.e. 36 teaching hours) took the online form. It must be added that group 1 comprised students whose school-leaver's examination (Matura) results in English were slightly better than those of group 2, but students of both groups had their English at B2/C1 level of CEFR. During the academic year the students were given 7 tests, for which they could receive the grades from 2 to 5 (where 2 means 'failed' and '5' 'excellent').

GROUP 1 TRADITIONAL APPROACH

T1	4,16
T2	4,10
T3	4,19
T4	4,07
T5	4,21
T6	3,51
T7	3,61
Average	3,97

GROUP 2 BLENDED LEARNING

T1	3,94
T2	3,74
T3	3,60
T4	4,04
T5	3,97
T6	3,08
T7	3,54
Average	3,70

Fig 1. Test results in 2014-2015 academic year

Figure 1 shows that group 1 obtained better test results than group 2. Their average is 3.97 which constitutes 79.4% of the best performance i.e. 100%, whereas the average of group 2's performance is 3.70, which is 74%. The difference was not significant and could be attributed to the fact that the students from group 1 were slightly better than the students from group 2. To confirm or confront the research results the study was repeated in the subsequent academic year i.e. 2015-2016, but this time group 1 participated in blended-learning classes (30% of the course i.e. 36 teaching hours was designed in online form), whereas group 2 followed the traditional, face-to face instruction which comprised 120 teaching hours. Again students who belonged to group 1 achieved slightly better results than their peers from group 2 at their school-leaver's examination (Matura) in English, but both groups' linguistic competence in English could be described as of B2/C1 level, according to CEFR. During the academic year they were tested five times and again they were given exactly the same tests, at the same time and evaluated alike. Their performance is presented in Figure 2 below.

GROUP 1 BLENDED LEARNING

T1	4,05
T2	3,83
T3	4,04
T4	4,23
T5	4,21
Average	4,07

GROUP 2 TRADITIONAL APPROACH

T1	3,81
T2	3,5
T3	3,83
T4	3,81
T5	4,14
Average	3,81

Fig 2. Test results in 2015-2016 academic year

The research results show that the both groups (regardless of the method adopted) performed better in comparison to their peers' performance the year before. Most probably the method adopted was irrelevant here, and that year students' general linguistic competence in English was merely greater. In terms of the students' performance the research did not prove that either method is more effective, and definitely more research is needed in that respect.

4. Conclusion and recommendations for further study

Albert Einstein once said: "I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots", which may provoke some discussion as to how far we should go in depending on technology in our lives. It can be stated without a doubt that technology makes our lives easier, but does it improve its quality? Does it make our work more effective? In recent years technology-mediated aids, apart from traditional printed materials, have become an important element of every ESP instruction. Even though most teachers are aware that the process is inevitable, there are still many instructors who, for various reasons, are reluctant to introduce it in their classes, questioning, for example, its effectiveness, which, on the other hand, is difficult to measure anyway.

This research project aimed to investigate how the law students and teachers of Legal English perceive the efficiency of blended learning approach in the process of ELP learning and to examine whether and to what extent blended learning exploited in the classroom contributes to delivering better teaching results. The findings drawn on the basis of the questionnaire, semi-structured interview conducted among teachers of Legal English and law students as well as the analysis of the law students' performance do not univocally indicate that using modern technology, particularly blended-learning here, for ESP instruction makes the instruction more effective. Both research groups assess blended learning quite critically, opting for traditional methods of instruction where all doubts and dilemmas are best explained ad hoc, albeit with each conceding that e-learning tools could serve as a valuable supplement to traditional classes. As far as the students' progress is concerned, the research does not prove either that blended-learning approach is more effective, but definitely more research is needed in that respect.

It is the fact that technology has entered our lives and we, teachers, cannot ignore the fact that it is present in every aspect of our students' daily lives. We should try to use it in the classrooms despite some challenges and shortcomings as it can be a valuable tool in the process of

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instruction. Nevertheless, one thing should be kept in mind here [expanding Jones's thought (1986) who over 30 years (!) ago said "it is not much the program, more what you do with it"]. To keep the balance, it is not only important to consider what you can do with the modern technology in the classroom, but also how you should use it to make the instruction more effective. Definitely this is a field that needs further investigating, especially in the context of its pedagogical effectiveness and with the present study the author hopes to provoke some discussion and further research in the area in question.

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