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BLENDED LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Fast technological advances of the modern world should be used for educational purposes. Blended learning gives an opportunity to make a shift from traditional methods to more innovative ones with the use of technology, which encourages both teaching and learning, provides flexibility in education. However, there are still many problems that need to be solved in order to raise the effectiveness of blended learning. The article considers the prospects and challenges of using blended learning in teaching English to university students, analyses possible solutions, determines the requirements to online English language teaching course and grounds the stages of its development.

INTRODUCTION

Fast technological advances of the modern world should be used for educational purposes. Online learning gives an opportunity to make a shift from traditional methods to more innovative ones with the use of technology, which enhances challenges, encourages both teaching and learning, provides flexibility in education.

The combination of face-to-face instruction and online learning is regarded as blended learning. It is currently used in teaching English by many universities with the aim of meeting the requirements of language learners, institutions, and authorities (Simpson, 2016) and providing the best educational

opportunities possible. However, there are still many problems that need to be solved in order to raise the effectiveness of blended learning.

The article aims at considering the prospects and challenges of using blended learning in teaching English to university students as well as determining the requirements to online English language teaching (ELT) course and grounding the stages of its development.

There are different definitions of blended learning as the term has been used for about 30 years. It first emerged in the world of business (Sharma, 2010), but due to accessibility of computers, growth in educational opportunities (Hong & Samimy, 2010), and disappointment with online learning which lacked some important elements typical of traditional classes (McDonald, 2008), blended learning soon gained popularity in the field of education. It was a logical response to the tendencies in education to combine different methods of teaching (Sharma, 2010).

In ELT the term has been widely used since 2007 when the famous Blended learning: Using technology in and beyond the language classroom by Sharma and Barret was published (Sharma and Barret, 2007).

Driscoll (2002) explains that blended learning is a mixture of different instructional forms which help to achieve the goal of education. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) consider blended learning to be the integration of classroom teaching and online activities. Singh (2003) claims that blended learning combines different tools (live chats, instant messaging, social networking, blogs and forums, webinars) which help to promote learning by making it motivational and meaningful.

Graham et al. (2003) summaries that blended learning combines instructional modalities, instructional methods as well as online and face-to-face instruction. It should appropriately combine synchronous interactive and asynchronous (individual) study (King, 2016). Synchronous study can be both face-to-face and online whereas asynchronous is usually online.

Watson (2008) claims that blended learning involves online delivery of educational content as well as classroom interaction, differentiated live instruction.

It provides a new effective learning pattern deprived of the limits of classroom-based courses, balance between digital and live communication.

According to Allen et al. (2007) a blended course provides 30–79 % of the content online. The researchers also distinguish a web facilitated course where 1–29 % of the content (syllabus, assignments etc.) is delivered online as well as an online course where most of the information is delivered online (≥ 80 %). There have been some attempts to differentiate blended and hybrid courses (Gruba and Hinkelman, 2012). The former covers up to 45 % of online

activities while in the latter 45–80 % of the course are done online. However, it may seem incorrect to determine the types of courses in percentage terms. Each course that combines online and face-to-face, synchronous and asynchronous learning may be considered blended.

Blended learning is becoming more and more popular in ELT. As a result, there is a growing number of the research that focus on different aspects of blended learning. In general they can be divided into two categories – comparison studies that compare the results of the same course in the two modes – face-to-face and blended and noncomparison studies which are concerned only with the blended courses, their design, implementation, teachers/students attitude etc. (Grgurovic, 2011).

The volume, edited by Tomlinson and Whittaker (2013), describes 20 case studies of blended learning programmes developed and implemented for teacher development, EAP (English for Academic Purposes), ESP (English for Specific Purposes), business English, general English in a variety of countries – Canada, Nigeria, Russia, Colombia etc. The analysis of the cases shows that though blended learning can be rather effective, implementing blended programs requires a lot of attention and preparation, and one the main questions is what to blend to ensure that each medium strengthens the other one.

To understand how effective blended courses may be for ELT, it is necessary to analyze the reasons why institutions develop and suggest them. For many of them it is a response to social, economic and educational challenges. Though there is a view that blended learning lowers costs, it still needs to be proved (Horn and Staker, 2012). However it surely helps when there is lack of classroom space, limited exposure to the English language that students may experience in some face-to-face courses (Aborisade, 2013), difficulties in attending classes for some students (e.g., due to political instability, illness etc. (Fleet, 2013). Another reason why institutions choose blended learning is the opportunity for differentiation according to students' learning preferences. They can choose the time, pace of learning, the place where to do the assignments, select the most useful tasks, which improves learners' academic results. Different modes of learning provide additional channels for interaction, more opportunities for cooperation and may be appealing to different learning styles. For example, some students need more time than others to study or may prefer virtual feedback to face-to-face one which may seem a little threatening for them (especially for the first-year students). Such characteristics prove that if properly organized, blended learning can be truly learner-centered.

Blended courses can help students to refine their technological skills. Jonassen et al. (2003) makes the conclusion about a growing need for students at tertiary level to improve technological skills, which is the requirement of the market. As the role of technology is increasing in the modern world, it is becoming more involved in the pedagogical frameworks of universities.

Since young people are very much interested in technology, blended courses may create a motivating learning environment, flexible in terms of learning time, location etc. In ELT blended courses are used to improve learners' writing abilities (Adas & Bakir, 2013), English communicative competence (Lawn & Lawn, 2015), develop students integrated skills (Pardo-Gonzalez, 2013, Zadorozhna et al., 2019) as integration of technology and face-to-face instruction can help to create communicative learning environment with meaningful outcomes (Rooney, 2003).

One of the main advantages of blended learning is the development of learners' independence. Doing a blended course, students often have to work on their own, take individual decisions, and find ways to achieve learning goals. Students learn to analyze internet-based information on its credibility and applicability, make appropriate use of internet-based resources as well as manage their time effectively, stick to deadlines. The development of appropriate skills prepares learners for life-long learning.

Despite undeniable advantages, blended course developers, instructors and students may face numerous challenges, which can influence the effectiveness of the blended course. Thus, the next part of the article will focus on the typical challenges, drawbacks and the ways how they can be eliminated.

It is sometimes claimed that studying online students may experience lack of classroom community and immediate response (Vonderwell, 2003). However, it is not a problem for blended courses as in this case students combine face-to-face communication with online learning. If any questions arise, they may discuss them either online or during classes. So if properly organized, blended courses may create a supportive and comfortable learning environment.

Another challenge is proper IT training of the instructors. They should be able to change the content of the course with the change of technology, keep in line with modern technological trends not to fall behind their students who are usually well-equipped technologically. With this aim institutions should provide them with the opportunity to be trained on the use of modern technologies. Training may include workshops, self-paced training resources, webinars, individual consultations etc., which contribute to both pedagogical and technological development of the university teachers. Instructors' training is an ongoing process, and it may take time for teachers to like the technology. A great challenge of blended learning is instructors' increased workload. If teachers become online tutors, they need to dedicate more time to learners as well as get used to their new role. Actually they combine two roles – of a face-to-face teacher and online tutor, which, on the one hand, is beneficial for the blended course organization as teachers know the objectives, the main challenges, students' problems etc., but, on the other hand, places more responsibilities on teachers. They must demonstrate pedagogical skills, offer contents that go beyond the textbooks, fruitful face-to-face and online interaction which supplement each other and thus is beneficial for all students.

That is why it is very important for institutions to train teachers how to develop blended courses and implement them. It will help instructors to manage their time efficiently and run the course effectively.

Learners also need technological support as the success of the course depends not only on its quality, teacher's readiness and enthusiasm, but on the students' abilities and skills to study online and combine the two modes. Lack of experience in the use of technology can decrease learners' motivation. There is a recommendation on gradual introduction of technology to the learning environment and close monitoring of students performance once the technology has been integrated into classroom activities (Ramachandran, 2004).

Before taking a blended course students should be made aware of its technological requirements as well as necessary skills. With this purpose they may be suggested to fill in a self-assessment grid which is further analyzed by the instructor. The analysis should result in useful recommendations on what the student needs to improve, what skills to acquire to effectively complete the course. Besides, it is advisable that institutions should offer special tutorials, resources, individual consultations, video orientation on using some tools for students to master the necessary skills. Learners should feel comfortable performing the role of a more independent learner.

Students' lack of motivation to be independent learners can substantially lower the success of the course. To increase motivation, it is important to create positive social interaction, encourage emotional relations between peers, develop emotional relations with the students during face-to-face meeting. Then the online part of the course will be more meaningful and successful. It also seems reasonable to suggest that those learners who find working autonomously challenging should undergo some initial training before participating in a blend course.

The analysis of potential challenges of blended learning shows the importance of preliminary training of both the instructors, who are going to develop and/or run the course, and the students who are to take it.

Developing a blended course it is necessary to understand its objectives which reflect the mission of the institution that is going to provide the course (Zadorozhna et al, 2019). Objectives determination should be preceded by careful analysis of students' needs and expectations, learning and teaching context, considering the reasons for utilizing blended learning and possible pitfalls which the instructor and students may experience. It is clear that course design which should meet students' expectations is the question of paramount importance for researchers as well as practitioners. As for the objectives, the course may focus on developing several skills (usually integrated). For example, the course that focuses on teaching listening skills, may include some written or oral response to the information heard, which

also influences students' speaking and writing skills. On the other hand, the main focus may be on some separate skills (e.g., listening or writing).

The next question to be answered is the type of blend to be utilized. Two modes – *adjunct* and *mixed* are distinguished in modern literature (McDonald, 2008). In the first case technology is used to enhance face-to-face learning, whereas in the second a great part of the curriculum is developed online. It is necessary to choose the lead mode (face-to-face or online) to determine the structure of the course and the learning process itself, decide on the amount of time spent on each mode, the purpose of each mode (Hockly, 2018). The choice of the mode depends on the objectives of the course, the educational context, infrastructural resources and the learning tool to be used. The technology applied should enable students to find their own objectives and ways, present them the language in all its complexity and give the opportunity to master it. Picciano (2009) suggests using multiple technologies in content delivery to meet the requirements of learners who may have individual preferences and enable them to study in the conditions which are comfortable and at the same time challenging to them. In any case the use of technology depends on the objectives and the context of learning and teaching. The tools used in a blended course must provide opportunities for input, output, prompt feedback, student(s)–student(s) and teacher(s)–student(s) interaction (written and/or oral depending on the objectives of the course). Nowadays such learning management systems as Moodle, Canvas etc. are often used as platforms on which the online parts of the course are delivered. As the platforms may be limiting in some aspects, a modern ELT blended course should be an integration of different tools, multimedia elements, social networking etc., which help students not only master language skills, but also develop digital literacy.

There is the view that technology should be used to enhance face-to-face teaching, which emphasizes the leading role of the face-to-face mode. In our opinion, the choice of the leading mode depends on the objectives of the course. For example, if the objective is to develop receptive skills (listening and reading), it may focus on online mode, if the main aim is to develop speaking skills, then face-to-face can be the lead mode. In any way, the course must maximize the potential of the two modes. For example, face-to-face part should provide students with the opportunities to communicate efficiently and meaningfully, socialize, build confidence, gain and improve communication skills while online sessions may be used for research, project work, reflection etc.

Face-to-face sessions are a good opportunity to get insight into what difficulties students experience in the online phase, analyze and eliminate them, develop additional tasks or adapt the existing ones. It is necessary to remember that no matter which mode dominates, the course must have unity and coherence as well as continuity. Besides, notwithstanding the lead mode, the online environment must focus on the learner, not the technology itself. In other words, it should be learner-driven, whilst technology should be viewed

as a tool for information distribution, exchange, communication etc. (Chinnery, 2006). Much depends on the teacher who works with the program, uses the technology and creates the environment which is supportive, interactive and encouraging for students.

As for the type of learning content distribution, it can be done either in a parallel or isolated way. The former presupposes several language skills practiced and developed in both modes while the latter means isolated practice of some skills in a certain mode (for example, speaking in a face-to-face part) (Neumeier, 2005).

It is quite evident that there should be an effective integration between the online and face-to-face components, which must develop and contribute to each other, provide learners with the opportunity to make the most of their studies.

It is very important to plan the design process and decide who will be involved in it, and what help the teacher/teachers will get in designing the course. As it has already been mentioned, before developing an effective blended learning environment teachers should be provided with technology training which includes demonstrating effective technologies and their adapting to the curriculum with the focus on the objectives of the course and students' needs. In other words, teachers must be not only taught how to use, adapt different technologies, but also to select pedagogically driven ones. There should be a variety of faculty development programs as well as IT and technical support (for example, web design) to help instructors design and then improve the course. It would contribute greatly if faculty could get feedback on course outline before it is launched. Besides, anonymous students' feedback should be obtained long before the course finishes giving the teacher an opportunity to improve it on the go.

Another question worth analyzing is the role of the teachers and students, types of interaction etc. Sharma and Barrett(2007) suggest determining and separating teacher's role and the role of technology, which will help to make them complementary. Technology acts as a tool which provides information and opportunities for instruction, practice, communication. Teacher's role is mainly of a facilitator, adviser and finally the evaluator of students' achievements. However, depending on the learners' level the objectives may vary and so the teachers' roles. Another important issue to be considered is interaction between the teacher and the students and between the students themselves in face-to-face and especially in technology-led parts of the course. Interaction can be both oral and written depending on the objectives of the course. Thus, the course which focuses on developing speaking skills must contain much oral communication both in class and out-of-class work, which is quite applicable with modern technologies. It is of utmost importance to set clear goals of such communication, which will make it meaningful, motivate students and help them understand their individual goals.

On choosing the mode and the technology it is necessary to make decisions on the timetable, sequence of the modes (alternating, parallel, or overlapping etc.), the tasks, determine obligatory and optional ones. In case of ELT it is highly advisable for course developers to provide not only obligatory assignments, but also optional ones among which students can choose those which are of utmost importance for them. For example, if the student understands that he needs to practice the particular vocabulary more, he can use the optional exercises suggested in the course. Such an approach helps to develop students' responsibility, reflexive skills and independence, provides an individual approach to learners. The level of learners' autonomy determines the way they are supported by the teacher during the course. If the students are ready and can work independently, the teacher facilitates the process and is primarily focused on the results which students demonstrate during communication or while doing different activities.

It has already been mentioned that blended courses are rather time-consuming for instructors, especially their technology-led component. That is why before launching a course it is necessary to decide how, when and how often feedback is given to students' on their out-of-class component. The feedback may be provided either online or during face-to-face meetings. However, as prompt feedback is as important as ever, it is quite possible that depending on the structure of the course feedback will often have to be given online, which means an increased workload on instructors. With this regard the limitation of the amount of hybrid courses teachers can deliver seems quite useful.

Teaching methods make a great influence on the effectiveness of the course and students achievements as well. They are usually influenced by the materials, technology, objectives and the teacher himself. The tasks suggested should require interaction, reflection, cognitive activity.

Neumeier (2005) claims that regarding the range of teaching methods online mode is usually more limited than face-to-face teaching. That is why face-to-face classes should be well prepared and well organized to counterbalance the limitation of the online mode; teaching (both online and offline) must be based on communicative approach, task-based, cooperative learning, which help to overcome the limitations of the online learning; materials should be carefully selected according to the relevant criteria and the tasks must be well developed. Besides, students must have the opportunity to choose texts, tasks etc.

Material distribution is another issue which is necessary to take into account. In blended courses students may have only online materials. However, investigations showed that some students may prefer printed materials and even a paper textbook

(Stracke, 2007). That is why before launching a course developers should study students' learning preferences and provide them with printed materials if necessary.

Learners' evaluation of technology-based work should be incorporated in overall students' assessment, which will create a coherent and logical system of evaluation of students' achievements during the whole course and will demonstrate learners the importance of both components. It will also help to prepare them for online courses which they will probably take in future.

Summarizing all the mentioned above, the following stages of ELT blended course design may be suggested:

- 1) Learners need analysis;
- 2) Analysis of the university learning environment and the potential for blended course implementation;
- 3) Determining the objectives of the course;
- 4) Content selection;
- 5) Selection of the mode and technology;
- 5) Course design;
- 7) Selection of methods and techniques;
- 8) Material design;
- 8) External assessment of the course (by experts);
- 8) Course implementation;
- 9) Evaluation (by students);
- 10) Revision.

No blended course, especially the one aimed at developing English language skills, is a final product. Usually it is constantly developed, refined, filled with useful up-to-date materials. Students' evaluation of the course influences its content and organization greatly.

The considerations presented in the article are not the full list of issues which developers and instructors face working with the blended course. However, it is hoped that the solutions suggested may support practitioners in developing efficient, scientifically grounded, well-balanced ELT course and the problems raised in the article will be paid attention to and further discussed in order to get some sound solution.

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