

Hybrid Learning and Teaching of EFL

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Abstract

This paper analyses the learning and teaching process of English as a foreign language at the University Goce Delcev in Stip, North Macedonia. It provides theoretical overview of the tools provided by the University and different methods and techniques used by teachers in the teaching process, as well as the resources that are being shared and made available to the students for their learning process. The focus is on all the elements included in the educational process of teaching English as a foreign language. The paper proposes that the variability in the teaching and learning processes at the university offers greater choice to students, and enables them to maintain a learning style that is personally most suitable for each individual student.

Keywords: EFL, hybrid education, learning, teaching.

1. Introduction

The educational process is continuously changing and developing. Throughout time many different models have been used to teach and many forms have been applied in learning. However, the great difference that occurred that drastically changed and influenced the educational process is technology and technological resources. Therefore, the educational process can be divided into two large models. The first one is marked by the traditional teacher-centred teaching without any type of a technology. This model rapidly decreased in frequency (but it did not end) with the innovation of technology, its high-paced advancement, and consequently with its implementation in the educational process. Herein, the second model is marked with a contemporary teaching that is interactive, student centred and technologically equipped.

Although it may seem that generally the teaching and learning processes have been only developing and improving, it is also true that the conduct of a specific teaching model or method depends on many factors such as the policies of the educational institution and the professors/teachers themselves. The practice shows that some institutions and professors lean towards the traditional model of a non-interrupted lectures conducted by the teacher regardless of the subject of study. Furthermore, many teachers avoid the usage of any kind of new technology in the classroom, or use some technology (such as audio recordings) but as rarely as possible. Also, many teachers do not consider mobile phones as technological tools that might enhance the educational process, but view them as unnecessary distractions. Despite this constant rejection of technological resources and new teaching methods, which is very frequent in North Macedonia, the new technology has slowly entered all areas and all levels of education.

The Goce Delcev University has been one of the leading universities in North Macedonia in terms of technology and its incorporation into the educational process. For more than 10 years, the university has offered online services to the students such as e-index, e-learning, individual

email address for each student, e-library etc. The students have an easy and quick access to materials, announcements, contact with the professors and a simple and efficient way to conduct all of the administrative work completely online. In this paper, I will present all general resources and possibilities for the students at the Goce Delcev University, with a special focus on the students at the Department of English language and literature at the Faculty of Philology.

2. Hybrid teaching and learning

Hybrid learning is defined as “synchronous teaching of students in the classroom and online simultaneously using an online platform” (Ulla, Perales., 2022, p.6). Research shows that it has become increasingly popular in higher education and students are familiar with this type of learning (Bouayad et al., 2024). Also, teachers have a positive perception of hybrid learning and are willing to put this educational innovation into practice (Vereshchahina et al., 2018, p. 96). Overall, most research done on hybrid learning and teaching determines its numerous advantages for both students and teachers.

Alnajdi (2014) describes hybrid learning as flexible and collaborative between teachers, students and the institution and emphasizes the adjustability to the learner’s needs as its main feature. Collaboration and interaction are also features that improve students’ concentration and attention regulation abilities, which helps he frequent attention deficit disorder of students (Jiang et al., 2023). Ulla and Perales (2022) determined the consideration of student’s learning preferences and the availability of technological equipment as benefits from hybrid learning. Hamid et al., (2022) confirmed the positive influence of media technology in the hybrid classroom, which results with increased student’s motivation on their involvement in class, increased students’ learning independence, improved interaction and communication between students and teachers, as well as improved assessment of students’ assignments. Other benefits as distinguished by Kholis and Harsul (2023) are the following:

- “saving energy, time and effort;
- convenience in teaching;
- flexible in class management;
- easy to assess and evaluate students;
- accessing in many references and resources;
- increasing digital literacy and students’ technical skills” (p.54).

The process of hybrid teaching and learning at the Goce Delcev University derived from the electronic resources and tools that were already implemented in a combination with the applications and tools of Microsoft teams, which were introduced during the covid pandemic. The covid pandemic in 2020 created a need for a completely online lessons, which was swiftly conducted with the help of Microsoft Teams groups for all subjects/courses. The transition was not due to the fact that all employees and students already had personalised ‘ugd’¹² accounts, and they have all been familiar with using online and electronic resources. Therefore, the addition of the Microsoft teams groups and the conduct of meetings was made available in a very short period of time.

It is important to note that the teams’ groups were only an additional resource that helped the students and teachers during the pandemic, and I strongly believe that its efficiency and contribution was increased due to the other online resources that were already available at our

¹² University Goce Delcev

university. The key for a successful conduct of the teaching and the learning processes is in the combination of the multiple resources that complement each other and reach their full potential only through their simultaneous usage.

3. Teaching and learning English

Nowadays hybrid teaching and learning is being implemented on all educational levels, primary, secondary and tertiary. Moreover, as (Singaravelu, 2021) has confirmed “hybrid learning is especially useful for acquiring communicative competency in English” (p.18).

The duration of all the courses at the Faculty of Philology, at UGD is 12 weeks, without the additional period I which students have to make a project paper and prepare for the final exam. The teaching process includes 12 in-person lectures that are usually conducted in a combination with a Power Point presentation, short videos, audio recordings etc. which are transmitted through a video screen, a tv or a smart board. Moreover, students that are unable to be present at the face-to face lecture are able to follow it through a Microsoft teams meeting. The lectures are also followed by 12 practical activities that depend on the subject area.

Often a lecture is considered by the general public as a speech conducted by the professor, and the students are mere listeners that may or may not ask questions after it. However, in contemporary education a lecture by a professor should be an interactive activity focused toward the students and their thoughts and questions on a given topic that follow the lecture’s topic. Therefore, I believe that the perfect lecture starts with a few general questions towards the students that simply encourage them to start speaking the English language, then the professor should lead and narrow the conversation toward the particular topic that is part of the lecture.

After the initial ‘ice-breakers’, the professor starts with the lecture that is often accompanied by a Power Point presentation. Here it is important to emphasize that the presentation should only serve as an additional tool and to improve our explanation with examples, photo or video additions, and to present the key points that the students should remember. On the contrary, if the presentation is long, with too much text and no clear structure, it will only distract our students and make our lecture less effective. Recent studies have proved the attention deficit of younger generation is a frequent problem and it is far from irrelevant to the teaching process. Herein, research and practice has shown that the best way of presenting is dividing the lecture into many smaller sections, repeating the key notions after each section, giving time to the student to reflect on them through a short group discussion and following each section with appropriate activities or exercises that will provide practice and additional repetition for the students.

Despite the lectures, professors share resources and tasks through the Moodle site that is specifically created for all courses separately. Teachers and professors of EFL have a slightly easier task than other professors in terms of preparation of practical activities due to the large number of resources about English and in English online on all subjects related to the English language. Professors are also encouraged to share announcements related to their specific course, the exam dates and other information that is considered useful for the students in their Microsoft team’s groups.

Herein, the application technological and online tools and resources together with face-to-face interactions confirms that the educational process at the Goce Delcev University can be defined as hybrid teaching and learning.

4. Electronic tools and resources

There are many other electronic tools and resources that are being offered to help students' organizational and time management skills, equip the students with necessary and additional materials for the courses, simplify administrative procedures and offer ready-made forms for administrative purposes etc.

4.1 E-learning platform

The first version of Moodle or the e-learning platform at UGD was introduced in 2008, and since then the number of participants and the number of offered courses has been only growing. It is an online learning platform accessible only to the students and the professors at UGD with their personalised 'ugd' accounts. The main aim of the platform is to enable the students to self-manage the learning process. Each subject has a personalised site on the platform, where the professor shares an overview of all the lectures, attaches additional sources and adds homework tasks. All the information about a particular subject is uploaded in one place, which enables the students to self-organize and self-manage by choosing by the place, the time-frame and the style of their learning. Furthermore, the structure of the platform motivates the students toward a self-studying and simultaneously teaches them organizational and management skills that are important for the whole educational process as well as for their future professional life.

4.2 Microsoft Teams

Microsoft teams was included in the teaching due to the start of the covid pandemic. The need for more electronic possibilities was visible from the increased use of Moodle, rose to three times more than usual during the start of the pandemic as confirmed by the analysis of Lapevska et al. (2021). The only option missing from the Moodle and the other online tools of the University was a video connection to the students. Therefore, the main benefit from this application was that it enabled the option to connect students that are sick or unable to attend in the actual face-to face lecture. On the other hand, the University made available a stable connection and viewing devices.

The Microsoft teams' groups allow the teacher to share many additional resources in a fast and efficient way. Students receive links toward activities where they can practise the newly learned material, the previously mentioned PowerPoint presentations are made available to them, as well as other pdf documents, word files, videos etc. that are all related with the study material. Another advantage of these groups is that it offers a direct communication among the students themselves, which is especially important for new students and first year students. The group enables them to communicate, discuss their tasks and work as a team. Also, the group serves as a direct link toward the professors, so that they can quickly help their student, answer any question or resolve possible problems that would take a lot longer without this tool. Certainly, there is a disadvantage for the professors, since they are seemingly available at any time or day for their students. Also, other drawbacks might appear or as Karafil, & İlbay (2024) claim: "challenges in assessment, internet connectivity, and student engagement. However, there is no doubt that the disadvantages are minimal compared to the numerous advantages for professors. In summary, the advantages of Microsoft teams include professor's ability to do the following:

- share a pdf file of a free book in English for reading;
- post an assignment with an explanation and a due date;

- correct and mark any mistakes directly on the assignment;
- post a video related to a specific lecture and topic;
- share notes from the lectures for absent students;
- add points and follow and save the work of their students all within their team for a particular subject;
- connect to a meeting directly from the face-to-face lecture and present simultaneously in real life and virtually;
- answer questions and help the students through the main group chat or a private message;
- share links to activities related to grammar or vocabulary practice, listening, reading or writing activities;
- post announcements or/and information for other events at the faculty...

The inclusion of the application was quick and the transition to hybrid teaching and learning was smooth due to the contemporary approach of the University toward online teaching and learning and all continuous work already implemented as normal in the overall functioning of the Goce Delcev University.

4.3 E-index

E-index is another contemporary tool that simplifies the administrative work for the students and transforms it into an easy, clear and quick task. In the past 10 years, students have been able to enrol in a new semester, apply to take an exam, pay their tuition, get signatures from the professors etc. with a few clicks on the computer. All students have their personal profiles on e-index with all the information as in printed indexes such as study programme, subjects, credits, signatures, grades etc. Moreover, the e-index also offers ready-made forms and payment sheets which student only fill out completely electronically. Herein, the time needed to do anything administrative for students' studies is decreased to a minimum, while the time they have to put into studying is vastly increased.

4.4 E – library

The e-library is a database of textbooks, workbooks, practicums, e-books, dictionaries, conference proceedings and various other resources that are free for all students. Students are able to enter the e-library with their 'ugd' accounts acquired since their enrolment and with one click any file can be downloaded. The data is listed by a Faculty to make the resource research even easier for students.

4.5 Academic calendar

The academic calendar is another useful time management tool for the students. It is an annual timeline for all the activities such as semester enrolment, midterm tests, exam sessions etc. Having all the information for the upcoming year is a great advantage for both students and teachers, since it enables a great time organization and efficient work completion.

4.6 Academic repository

The university's repository is a large database of articles, papers, books etc. published by the professors at the university as well as the MA and PhD students at the university as well. The database is public and research can be made by author's name, department, subject area or year. It serves as an extension to the e-library for students, but it is also a useful tool for professors.

4.7 UGD Scholar

UGD Scholar is an academic profile for employees at the Goce Delcev University. It offers information about professors and other employee's biography, data on publications which usually is a direct link toward the above mentioned UGD Repository database; as well as information on the courses taught by a specific professor and announcements regarding those courses. The main aim of this page is to encourage collaboration, show the academic work done by the employees and simply inform the public and introduce future students to the staff members.

5. Conclusion

The contemporary educational process is a student-centred interactive activity that is and should be realised with an equal inclusion of students, teachers and technological resources. Herein, hybrid learning and teaching is the most advantageous and most efficient model of education. The paper gives an in-depth overview of all the aspects of the educational process and its conduct at the Goce Delcev University. The electronic platforms the various tools and resources enable the students with the following: a good learning environment, free access to both obligatory and additional study materials, simplified and fast conduct of administrative work related to their studies, connection to their fellow students and professors etc. All of the provided advantages help the students to have: better organizational skills, good time-management, a self-paced study process, preferable learning style and multiple possibilities for further study and research. In conclusion, the model of hybrid learning and teaching is successfully being conducted at the Goce Delcev University and it is the most appropriate and most beneficial model for students of English language and literature.

6. Literature

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Short presentation of the author

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