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Editors

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Chapter - 7

A Research Proposal Model for the Application of Blended Learning in Modern English Language Teaching

Simona Serafimovska

Abstract

The traditional method of learning the English language in university settings has yielded good results for foreign language learners, especially in developing countries. However, progress in all spheres of society and the development of new technologies have directly influenced the modernization of methods in English language learning. In this context, research plays a significant role, with innovations being publicly promoted through research projects and the creation of doctoral dissertations by young researchers.

This, de facto, also serves as a foundation for the development of a model that offers a modern approach to scientific research in university settings, creating a bridge between the traditional methods of learning English and the application of new technologies. In a classically advanced form, the model provides young researchers/doctoral students with a methodology and phased approach, with clearly defined objectives, research subjects, and the formulation of theses upon which a contemporary scientific work should be based. This paper elaborates in detail on the most important issues that should be addressed in the research process, through the modeling of research based on the example of students and teachers at Goce Delchev University in Štip, applying a blended learning system, commonly known as Blended Learning.

Keywords: Modern technologies, blended learning, students, teachers, language, research

Introduction

The world we live in today has an unprecedented number of opportunities to communicate in a compelling and authentic way. A lot of fascinating options for enhancing teaching using technology are available for English teachers. This can be challenging for the teachers when trying to choose which tools, resources, websites are ideal for a particular lesson or session. These

opportunities have become a norm in our daily lives and entail social media, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence. In this thesis we are going to look at how technological interactions have taken over our daily lives and how these interactions can be used to benefit the learners to have an extensive practice of the English language.

The implementation of different teaching methods has been a result of the increasing number of English learners to improve effectiveness in the process of teaching. Technology has greatly transformed the older ways of teaching English as a foreign language. Globalization has also been a positive influence on education and culture. Currently, several fields such as education, media and more have English playing an important role. Technology assists in making the teaching of English as a foreign language more interesting as it gets students involved taking into consideration their interests. This has increased the use of English by more speakers as it spreads throughout the world.

The research in this thesis, as study case, involves University "Goce Delcev" in Stip and the way how smart technologies and blended learning classroom are being used by EFL teachers into their teaching practice and students in their learning practice.

The constant growth of Information Technology has provided a better platform for the exploration of a new model of teaching. The use of multimedia to create an English teaching context generates its rare advantage like having the English teaching classroom as a site of critical thinking and active learning. To easily and efficiently meet the individual student needs, teachers may rely on technology to tailor and create authentic instructional materials. A majority of educational institutions, due to the steady rise of ICT, have begun the search for new models of teaching with an aim of.

- Providing learning activities that are effective for the students.
- Promoting an environment that motivates students.
- To meet student needs through introduction of new technology.

Traditional tools used in the study of English as a foreign language entailed television and cassette players, while currently the computer is considered the first teaching aid in the ELT, especially with the addition of the internet.

In general, blended learning may be considered as the amalgamation of online solutions and face-to-face lessons. Fundamentally, this combination means the exploitation of each approach to benefit the overall learning environment (Holmes & Gardner, 2006). Due to its effectiveness higher education later incorporated blended learning in the teaching and learning of languages. According to Bonk and Graham, (2012) all learning can be considered blended learning as it has been a major factor in instruction, training, and learning the landscape. Additionally, the term may pose a challenge to define as it lacks consensus on a definite definition since at times it is referred to as mixed or hybrid learning. In higher education, blended learning has been identified as classroom and technology combined instructions in a learning approach that identifies the advantages of some online assessment and training delivery (Banados, 2006).

In our opinion, the term blended learning can be used to signify computer technology inclusion to facilitate offline and online actions and materials as compared to considering it as a whole new teaching and learning approach. Blended learning definition concerning learning and teaching languages can be described as a combination of computer-assisted learning (CAL) and face-to-face instructions in an environment of teaching and learning.

According to Picciano *et al.*, (2013) research conducted on blended learning is new and linked to other fields like CALL (computer-assisted language learning), pedagogical technology, methodology in English teaching, and distance education. Blended learning is also defined, according to Bonk and Graham (2012), as a combination of computer-assisted instructions and traditional face-to-face instruction. Neumier (2005) defines blended learning's main aim as finding an effective and efficient combination of the two learning models for the context, objective and subjects of the learning individual. Tayebinik and Puteh (2013) stress the use of blended learning in place of online or face-to-face learning due to its promotion of the community and the student's engagement. Blended learning online components make it possible for students to learn no matter the time or location. One of the unique characteristics of blended learning, according to Rhem (2012) is that it allows the provision of classroom activities in person and online.

Zhang and Zhu (2018) note it is difficult to find a suitable environment for all learners but the approach of blended learning promotes a teaching and learning environment that is flexible, encouraging, active, inspiring and interactive. A framework for the designing of a blended learning environment entails six elements for designing a blended learning environment for teaching and learning. The parameters entail: integration model, mode, learning

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content, and objective distribution, methods of language teaching, learning subjects' involvement and location. Graham (2006) portrays several blended learning levels like: course-level blending, activity-level blending, institutional-level, and program-level blending. What is common for these levels is their combination of online elements and traditional mode of teaching regarding the learning type. Below is an illustration of a blended learning environment.

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 no comparison studies which are concerned only with the blended courses, their design, implementation, teachers/students attitude etc. (Grgurovic, 2011).

Pardo-Gonzales (2013) and Tomlinson and Whittaker (2013), described 20 case studies of blended learning programmers 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 (Rashid *et al.*, 2021).

Some researchers understand blended learning as a subordinated field (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004) while others see it as a continuation of e-learning (Thorne, 2003). However, it is also presented as a reaction to "a general sense of disillusionment with the stand-alone adoption of online media" (MacDonald, 2008). The field is not plagued by the level of definitional plurality as e-learning. It rather shows a functional division as illustrated by the aforementioned interpretations. As blended learning is a crucial area in the studies presented in the second part of the dissertation, similarly to e-learning, a working definition needs to be introduced.

In Simon and Kollárová (2015) it was argued that blended learning relates to "cases where face-to-face lessons are supported by virtual or online sessions by using the same technology that is present in the course". Minimizing student resistance to blended environments was a central issue in this approach. Although using the same technology enables the application of

learning environments in a manner that supports technological socialization acceptance, this formulation is rather confusing. As differences will likely be present in the face-to-face and online spaces, same technology usage should be removed in favor of a guiding frame to structure the environments to support and not disrupt the learning experience. A further problem with this definition lies in its lack of a practical aspect. Sharma (2010) approaches blended learning as three possible combinations. These concerns merging of online and face-to-face solutions, technologies and methodologies. The above working definition only addressed the first and although Sharma (2010) mentions it being the most well-known, the others occupy similarly important positions in the framework. Thus, the issue of technology both inside and outside of the classroom needs to be readdressed. For this reason, the revised working definition of blended learning, concerns the development or adaption of complementary online and face-to-face learning environments which are used simultaneously to reach educational goals.

Blended learning is a highly versatile approach to learning that can generate both traditional and online solutions to arrive at a model that combines the advantages of both. However, it also comes with a number of disadvantages that are partially also present in e-learning in general. In the following, three such drawbacks are discussed as they represent cornerstones in current blended implementation. The first considers methodological solutions that affect the content delivery of institutions. This is followed by how blending affects learning communities. Finally, the connections between economic changes and blended solutions are addressed. Liu and Tourtellott (2011) call attention to the flexibility that online learning enables in learning and timetable possibilities. While these are favorable options for students, they also highlight that one of the central issues is strategic institutions is technology use in the institutions.

Research field

The main research postulates will cover the three pillars that refer to blending in practice, benefits of blended learning and limitations of blended learning.

In regards to blended learning in practice I would like to stress that traditional learning within the educational process has recently been increasingly replaced by blended learning in which the application of new technologies and E-processing is gaining ground. Blended learning was

described as "the third generation of distance learning systems" where the first two are correspondence courses using different mediums (Phipps and Merisotis, 1999). Their categorization highlights an important aspect of using online education, both in itself and in a blended environment. This is the possibility for learners to join classes without the geographical barriers of traditional settings. However, blended learning can be approached from two main perspectives. It can be a combination of online and face-to-face elements or the introduction of online elements. Allen and Seaman (2010) classify online content delivery the following way: "0%: Traditional, 1 to 29%: Web Fabricated, 30 to 79%: Blended/ Hybrid, 80+%: Online". Based on this analogy, only those courses can be labeled blended which are designed to have at least 29% face-to-face sessions. Thus, blending requires teachers to restructure their courses in a dual manner whereby the face-to-face lessons need to utilize the presence of teachers and other students. In practice this means two possible approaches. The first approach to blending considers introducing new materials during online sessions, where the flexibility of online learning makes it possible to practice and further extend upon what has already been introduced to learners. The second possibility means taking the opposite approach. As such, it entails that the online environment is also used to introduce new materials, however, the face-to-face sessions are responsible for discussions and deep-knowledge development. Peachey's (2013) argument about how online solutions can be applied to increase the possible learning time supports this point. Extending the temporal limitations of courses can equal a more diversified approach to how the materials are handled.

Opting for blended learning approach surely can bring numerous benefits, both, for students and English language teachers. Selection of a blended approach not only means flexibility in terms of management, it could impact class size as well. Returning to the differences between blended and fully online, Dudeney and Hockly (2013) address the two the following way. They explain that blended learning is especially suitable for bringing together students in local areas, whereas the benefactors of the fully online implementation would be international participants. Thus, as already discussed, blended courses have huge advantages through their online element opposed to traditional delivery where geographical distances would more likely hinder such online collaboration Blended learning makes it possible to teach in a way that bypasses the rigidness of traditional timetables and adds the opportunities provided by online environments. However, as Garrison and

Kanuka (2004) emphasize, blended learning is largely concerned with "rethinking and redesigning the teaching and learning relationship". Such issues include changes in the implementation of the course material, class management and possible participants, however, a major change involves how communication happens in a blended context. Both communication and the included technological dimension are areas where blended learning can possibly induce anxiety.

As everything in life has two sides (positive and negative), the same counts for the blended learning. Namely, blended learning has its limitations of its own. As addressed previously, there are a number of benefits of using a blended approach. These can be summed up in Pardo-Gonzales' (2013) listing of "flexibility in their learning environment, personalized instructor feedback in and outside class and recognition of the value of face-to-face instruction". However, there are also hindering factors that need to be calculated with when designing the online component of blended learning. Precel et al., (2009) identify three aspects that can work against the success of online learning. These include "reading from a digital display, loneliness and digital skills". For this reason, the introduction of any blended environment should be preceded by a needs analysis and implementation requires careful monitoring. The flexibility of blending should make it possible to address the emerging issues during the course. However, there are some limitations that can be avoided by a simple pre-course training, for example familiarizing the students with the new context. This way a number of problems can be dealt with prior to starting the course. Although some of these limitations appear to be gender and age related, they are more connected to technology acceptance and anxiety. Overall, these limitations can be overcome by utilizing motivating contexts where students are engaged in their development and understand how their skills are transferable to other environments.

Aims of the research

The application of new technologies in the modern educational process is inevitable because the overall development both in the world and in our country is based on innovation. The recent pandemic period has addressed this issue and the application of blended learning with the help of modern technological tools has become a necessary necessity. At the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip, students are already accustomed to E-learning and the use of modern technologies in their student life, which is a prerequisite for keeping pace with the modern world in the direction of educational needs. Of course, the students from the Faculty of Philology are no exception to this trend of

mixed English language learning, but our challenge in this dissertation is to explore and argue all that has been reached with the application of new technologies at this young state university.

The main goal within this dissertation will be the research related to the use of mixed learning, among the students from the Faculty of Philology at the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip. The methodological survey approach within our research will cover part of the teaching staff. As a precondition for successful realization of these goals, we consider the correct IT installation of the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip and the powerful servers that support the entire university. At the same time, to meet the goals, there is an optimal quantum of over 150 active students who will be the subject of a survey in our research.

Dissertation hypotheses

Priorities in the research and definition of hypotheses within this dissertation are the inclusion of new technologies and tools that will contribute to the permanent replacement of the classical way of learning English at the University "Goce Delchev" in Stip by applying the modern mixed type of learning, which is increasingly used in the developed world. In that context, among the goals of these hypotheses is to devise a solution for converting the teaching contents in English at the University "Goce Delchev" in Stip from those conceived according to the principle face to face in mixed courses with greater application of new technologies and e-learning.

To achieve this goal, six main hypotheses were formed as the main topics in the implementation of research and studies within this dissertation. The studies were motivated by two main questions. The first was the knowledge about the reduced results of the preliminary tests of the English language department, for mastering the English language for the first year students at the University "Goce Delchev" in Stip. Second, students presented a list of language development needs that could not be addressed during face-to-face lectures due to time constraints. Hence, a combined approach was applied to take advantage of the added online element.

- 1) Thesis 1 represents the phase of combined listening and speaking.
- 2) Exploring the development of the transition to mixed learning in listening and speaking English.
- 3) Testing experiences in applying mixed English language learning through Google Forms or Surveymonkey

- 4) Questions about the perspectives of the mixed learning to the English language teachers at the Faculty of Philology at the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip.
- 5) Testing the students' satisfaction with the redesigned courses in the style of mixed learning.
- 6) Challenges for English Teachers in Developing Mixed Learning Skills for Correspondence

Research methodology

The methodological approach for achieving the defined goals within this dissertation will use as a basis the infrastructural possibilities and the personnel potential of the Faculty of Philology at the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip for assessment of the factual situation with the application of the mixed learning in the English language. According to the set goals, the research will take place in several phases. In the first phase, a survey will be conducted of approximately 150 active students from the Faculty of Philology at the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip who are in the English language group. The survey will be conducted in accordance with a prepared questionnaire which will be dominated by questions related to mixed learning, its level of application, its effects and of course its importance in learning English at this higher education institution. The second phase will contain the survey for the teachers at the Faculty of Philology at the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip who directly practice the mixed learning. The third phase envisages a short face-to-face survey with selected individuals from students of different years of study which will directly assess the level and level of application of mixed learning within the Faculty of Philology at the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip. The next stage in the methodological approach will be the stage of synthesis and interpretation of the results obtained by practicing the Google Form and Survey Monkey platforms. As a result of the phased research, appropriate conclusions will eventually be constructed.

Importance of the thesis

Realization of such a doctoral dissertation probably has multiple significance not only because it would determine the degree of application of mixed learning in the study of English in one of the units of the University "Goce Delchev" in Stip, but would open greater opportunities for learning the benefits of the application of modern technologies and the gradual mixing of the traditional or lately stereotypical way of learning languages.

To understand how effective combined ELT courses can be, it is necessary to analyze the reasons why institutions develop and propose them. For many, it is a response to social, economic and educational challenges. Although there is a view that combined learning reduces costs, it still needs to be proven (Horn and Stacker, 2012). However, it certainly helps when there is a lack of classroom space, limited exposure to English that students may experience in some face-to-face courses (Aborisade, 2013), difficulty attending classes for some students (e.g. due to political instability, illness, etc. (Fleet, 2013) Another reason for exploring mixed learning is the possibility it provides for differentiation according to students' learning preferences. They can choose time, pace of learning, place to perform tasks, to select the most useful tasks, which enhances students' academic performance.Different learning modes provide additional channels for interaction, more opportunities for collaboration, and may be appealing to different learning styles (Rashid et al., 2021). some students need more time than others to learn or may prefer virtual feedback rather than face-to-face that may seem a little threatening to them (especially for first year students). Such characteristics prove that if properly organized, combined learning can be really studentcentered. In this context we can conclude that the preparation of such a dissertation will be of particular importance for the University "Goce Delchev"-Stip, especially since it is a new contribution to the development of English language learning in these areas because the Faculty of Philology at the University "Goce Delchev "-Stip Doctoral studies are not organized yet.

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Structure of the thesis

The structure of this Doctoral thesis is divided into seven separate chapters excluding the references.

Expected basic structure.

Conclusion

Blended learning of English is already a constant practice in many European countries, and recently it has become a trend and a need in our country, especially in the conditions of a pandemic. The practice of blended learning in the study of English cannot be unconditionally applied in the educational process. The basic precondition is the existence of a powerful server, which will provide all separate entities of the university (the faculties) with a stable Internet, as a precondition for the application of new technologies and tools in learning English.

At the University "Goce Delchev" in Stip there is a powerful server that enables rapid application of new technologies in the study of English, and of course it is a good prerequisite for the realization of the planned surveys within the experimental part, for the needs of this particular doctoral dissertation.

The extent to which continuity of blended learning will be practiced largely depends on the readiness of the teaching staff to realize this important process, which means connection with the modern world. Experiences so far show that the professionalism of the teachers at the University "Goce Delchev" in Stip is at a high level, and the technical staff that supports the operation of new technologies is commendable.

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