POSITIVE ASPECTS AND DIFFICULTIES OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE BLENDED LEARNING COURSE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning stands in education, on the one hand for striving to optimally combine today’s technological possibilities for online learning with learning phases in the classroom. On the other hand, it is about making the best possible use of various didactic possibilities and putting the didactic findings into practice (DRISCOLL, 2002; NIELSEN, 2013). Searching for the best combination in German-speaking countries nowadays based on several years of experience (IBERER, 2014; SCHOBER, 2006) and has already been researched from various points of view (GRAHAM, 2013; SMYTH, 2012). However, the studies show, that the evaluation of a flexibilization process is seldom comprehensive and is mostly limited to one target group (e.g. students) or one dimension (e.g. didactic processes or “technology acceptance”) (BLIUC, 2007; HALVERSON, 2014; TRIOLA, 2012). The presented project takes a first step towards developing a comprehensive evaluation process to support the flexibilization of a master’s program. This evaluation process is to be further developed in the sense of a longer-term, cyclical development in accordance with a “design-based research” procedure (ANDERSON, 2012; REEVES, 2008).

Many studies and practical teaching scenarios have already shown that there are different options for using digital media in foreign language lessons, which differ in the degree of virtualization of the possible uses (BACHMANN et al. 2002; SCHULMEISTER, 2005). The frequently used options include the enrichment of face-to-face events, fully virtual learning, partially virtual learning or blended learning (RÖSLER, 2010).

The term “blended learning” originally comes from English (blend ~ mischen) and is translated into German as “mixed learning” (REINMANN, 2011; BAUMGARTNER, 2009). In media didactic research, “blended learning” is interpreted according to different weightings: hybrid learning or hybrid learning arrangements (KERRES, 2002), integrated learning (COYLE, 2010), mixed learning (BAUMGARTNER, 2009, REIMANN, 2011) and combined learning (mixture of e-learning and traditional face-to-face teaching (KOTZ, 2009).

Two different opinions are circulating in the teaching context on how to understand blended learning. In the course of the hype about the concept of “e-learning” at the end of the last century, blended learning was sometimes defined as the “savior” or “ultimate solution” for e-learning, because practice often showed that e-learning did not lead to successful learning and has many disadvantages (MERKELBACH, 2007a). Kohn (2006) defines blended learning as “the didactic connection of traditional forms of teaching and learning with the new possibilities of multimedia and eLearning” (emphasis in the original).

PROJECT

The coronavirus pandemic has turned out to be the biggest challenge the modern educational systems across the world have ever faced (LUKIANOVA, 2020). Thousands of academics...
around the world were forced to turn their lectures and face-to-face classes to online courses for millions of students, within a few days’ notice. The most common case is that each university chose an existing teleconference platform like Zoom, Webex, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Collaborator etc., and offered the same lectures as online courses, which as anyone can understand did not have the expected outcomes. Both students and lecturers got tired, even bored, during classes, absenteeism was very high amongst students, technical difficulties occurred all time, socializing and cooperation -crucial aspects of student learning- were almost non-existent and of course, the quality of the class was much lower than the expected one. The Covid-19 crisis has shown that once we lose or even diminish social contact, it is very easy to fail in digital inclusion.

On the other hand, this situation revealed all the positive aspects of eLearning, such as flexibility on schedule, participation without having to move from rural or secluded areas, especially when they do not have the chance to do so. The latter has been even more relevant and prominent due to the restrictions that have taken place in order to avoid spreading COVID 19.

In Ukraine, the idea for a BLC (Blended learning course) arose in the context of a SARS epidemic because the course participants were not allowed to meet in a course room for hygienic reasons. In order to become more flexible and accessible in the future, to enrich teaching practices and to promote greater independence of the students, the strategic direction of the bachelor’s program has been revised and became more flexible. A research project was developed with the following objectives: 1) accompanying, documenting and analyzing the likely multi-stage implementation process; 2) developing an evaluation process that can be transferred to similar operations. In agreement with the lecturers concerned, the traditional lecture formats were converted to blended learning formats.

**METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH**

These theoretical methods of research were used for studying and analysis of the pedagogical literature: analysis, synthesis & comparison. In order to study the specifics of planning German and English classes as a blended learning course and its effectiveness in a foreign language class planning, we used empirical methods: survey and included observation, as well as methods of mathematical statistics.

Three dimensions of the flexibility project were considered in the evaluation: 1) the structure-related factors (technical requirements, user-friendliness of the learning platform, time use survey); 2) the assessment of the course of the semester (change of teaching and learning process); and 3) the results (flexible organization, grading of the students and satisfaction of the lecturers). All affected persons were included in the evaluation of the flexibilization project. The lecturers were asked in a semi-structured interview about preparation, procedure, effects on didactic processes and satisfaction. The interviews were analyzed. In addition to the usual questionnaires for the course evaluation at the faculty of foreign languages, the students also answered questions about the course of the new flexible semester. For this purpose, excerpts from tested, reliable instruments were compiled into an online questionnaire and supplemented with context-related questions: TAM (Technology Acceptance Model) (NGAI, 2007); Web-Based Learning Environment Instrument (WEBLEI) (CHANG, 2003); Distance Education Learning Environment Survey (DELES) (WALKER, 2005). The questionnaire also contained free text fields for comments. In addition, selected data (e.g., use of individual activities by the students) from the learning platform (Collaborator) were analyzed and the administration staff was interviewed.

To obtain objective and reliable results in the focus group survey, 10 focus-groups were formed (5 groups – English language learners for special purposes of Pedagogical University, 4 groups – German as a second language learners of pedagogical university, 1 group – foreign language teachers). Each group included 15 participants, who were randomly assigned. When forming the focus-groups of students, the following sample parameters were considered: education (Bachelor’s degree), course of study and specialty. The participants were heterogeneous in terms of their foreign language proficiency, age, and gender. The study took place during the 2020-2021 academic year. The students had been learning English as
a foreign language and German for one year to four years in this particular university. Lessons were conducted four times a week. Educators with experience of scientific and pedagogical activity over 10 years were randomly selected. The participants of the study were informed about the purpose and the structure of research and assured that their names would not be used in the study reports. The total number of participants in the focus group study is 150 people.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

While describing positive aspects and difficulties in this research, the educational dimension was primarily focused. However, it should be noted that the educational dimension is closely linked to the economic and technical dimension. For example, technical advantages make it possible to learn anytime, anywhere and at your own pace. This presentation provides initial data on the positive aspects and difficulties of these three dimensions. With this overview, the central question to the dimensions in which positive aspects and difficulties in learning foreign languages with BLC are more or less to be found in groups with English language learners and in groups with German language learners). Basing on this, certain aspects are selected as well as a detailed evaluation with individual aspects.

On the last days of each course, the students noted three important advantages and positive aspects (impulses) and three major difficulties for them in learning German and English languages with the online phase in evaluation sheets. The diagrams below summarize their notes by dimension:

Graph. 1: Summary of the mentioned positive aspects of the BLC in the evaluation sheets

![Graph 1: Positive Aspects: educational dimension](image1)

Source: Search data.

Graph. 2: Positive Aspects: economic/technical

![Graph 2: Positive Aspects: economic/technical](image2)

Source: Search data

The number of answers in Graph. 1 clearly shows that the positive impulses in the two groups mainly revolve around the educational and economic aspect of learning German and English...
languages with BLC. Although the German learners did not learn repeatedly with the BLC, they were still able to recognize some important educational advantages, which are largely similar to the English learners. In addition, the large number of answers of economic advantages of Group of the German learners is striking, which is understandable, because the number of English learners (75) is significantly larger than the number of German learners (60). Due to the lack of the face-to-face contact, the mainly economic and technical advantages can be seen at once.

In Graph. 1 many students of each group noted in the evaluation sheet that they were able to repeat German and English effectively with the BLC and train four language skills or learning competencies (vocabulary, grammar), whereby they dealt with the learning activities more often. In addition, a total of answers of each group for the acquisition of additional skills (self-determined learning skills, cooperative learning skills, media skills) can be found. The different reasons for their positive aspects are implied in Graph. 1

From the educational perspective, the variety of exercises and the coordination of content with face-to-face lessons, the expansion of learning opportunities (promoting of individual learning), and communication options have contributed to effective German and English languages learning with the BLC.

Table 2 shows that the difficulties mentioned in the online phase of learning German belong to both the pedagogical and technical aspects, with technical difficulties and educational problems predominating. This result does not mean that learning German and English languages with the online phase causes few educational problems. However, it should be noted that technical difficulties in learning German and English languages often appear in the online phase. The students were asked whether they were impaired or significantly influenced in the learning process and the learning outcome.

Graph. 3: Summary of the mentioned difficulties of the BLC in the evaluation sheets

Source: Search data.

In addition, graph 2 shows that each group has largely similar technical difficulties: with the incomprehensible tasks, their quality and quantity, with the complex execution of the functions on the learning platform as well as with certain tools and problems with access to the Internet. In terms of difficulty, the only difference between each group is, that the most respondents (50%) of English learning indicated difficulties with technical interruptions, when the respondents of German learning face the most problems (35%) with time management.
Considering all the difficulties mentioned, the question arises as to why they encountered these difficulties. Are their difficulties typical ones in learning foreign language with digital media that German language learners around the world have? Is the trigger or the cause in the online phase or the specific target Group with culture-related learning traditions that are not yet ready for more demanding German and English learning with digital media? These questions are particularly important for the optimization of future BLC, because the difficulties can be avoided or reduced as far as possible through the answers.

With regard to the educational dimension, similar exercises in the two learning phases should be included in future BLC. Instead, the adaptivity of the learning platform and differentiation options should be ensured. With regard to the technical implementation, the use of the learning platform and especially the access to tasks should definitely be made easier in order to waste less time. Otherwise, it can lead to frustration and dropouts.

Similar to the implementation of the BLC, the students mentioned the positive and negative effects of learning German and English with the BLC on their learning process and their learning outcomes. Due to time autonomy and location, quick access to learning materials, and the numerous forms of presentation, the learning process of many students can be made flexible, simpler, and more interesting in terms of economic and technical advantages. This can make learning German and English more motivating and effective. In addition to the economic and technical advantages, educational advantages were mentioned by the students, which refer to the mutual complement or the meaningful combination of the two learning phases: increasing learning activity, making learning processes more flexible, promoting individualization, strengthening self-determined learning skills, encouragement/expansion, communication and interaction possibilities, intensification of interaction and promotion of cooperative learning competence (IHNATOVA, 2019).

In the opinion of the students, these advantages have contributed to the fact that they were able to effectively repeat and possibly expand their German skills, especially thanks to the coordination of content, the variety of tasks, and the individual and cooperative learning opportunities. Furthermore, there are opportunities in the BLC for the students to acquire and train additional skills (self-determined learning skills, cooperative learning skills, media skills). It is noticeable that all respondents, despite their different learning experiences (learning types), perceived similar learning potentials, and not only the English learning students but also those German learning students experienced and recognized this potential.
In fact, the learning process of many students is effectively and efficiently designed through the sensible integration of the BLC, especially the online phase that accompanies the curriculum. However, the sometimes-problematic implementation of the BLC causes both technical and educational difficulties. At the technical level, many students in the two groups have problems with the Internet connection, the complex way of working, the confusing structure of the learning platform, PC knowledge and the multi-step access to tasks. Externally, there was also the fact that a defective Internet cable in Ukraine made access to the network extremely difficult for a definite time.

On the education level, the two groups encountered difficulties with incomprehensible tasks that are only available in German and in English. However, there are differences between the two groups in terms of educational difficulties. 35% of English learners often dealt with the learning platform and with the tasks, although they found the programmed feedback of the VSPU (Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University) not understandable enough and therefore problematic. In addition, this learning group would like having more tasks because they have time to practice out of the classroom lessons and they like learning with the online phase. Meanwhile, German learners reported great difficulty with lots of new words, Internet research, boring assignments, and group work. There are also developed personal difficulties, which in part caused their weak intensity with the learning platform: distraction in online learning, difficulties with the groups and time management, personal problems. Compared to English learners, who tried to overcome difficulties on their own, some students in German groups wanted no longer to learn or even stopped learning. Such factors as previous technical knowledge, experience or (lack of) motivation are responsible for their decision. The last two factors can also be found in the Blended Learning study by Launer (2008).

Despite the difficulties mentioned, the online phase or the learning platform plays a certain role in the learning process and the learning outcomes of many students (at least 30%). This proportion corresponds exactly to the function performed in the online phase in the established BLC. This proportion has risen to 60% because, in their opinion, learning German and English languages with the platform is more effective than classroom teaching (ability to learn/benefit from the learning platform better at home during the course than in face-to-face lessons. The important role of the learning platform in many ways (educational, content, technical) is confirmed as a contribution to successful and motivated learning.

Graph. 5: The Level of Motivation to learn in BLC

Source: Search data.

The data analysis allowed a comprehensive assessment of the processes before, during and after the flexibilization of the semester.

Furthermore, certain statements could be made on the following topics with regard to flexibility:
Use of the Collaborator platform: This learning platform is easy to use. However, support is important for both students and lecturers. Clear instructions on online activities are particularly important for courses that include restarting every semester.

Didactic revision: The process had a structuring effect on the course processes and caused a dispute among the lecturers with their content and didactic methods. The students completed successfully the theoretical basics in the self-learning phase. It is obvious, that the offline learning can be better used for experience exchange, peer learning and discussion.

Self-determined learning: Although students show themselves to be more independent in the learning process, they do not always appreciate this greater degree of personal responsibility. It is acknowledged, that the organization of the blended learning process is easier than the traditional one. Some students have the possibility to combine learning with work and family.

Grading: The grades of the students were similar to those of the students in the previous year in the same semester.

Satisfaction: Students and lecturers equally valued the newly created flexibility. However, they regretted the less of face-to-face contacts.

Overall, students and lecturers were satisfied / very satisfied with the flexibility and the teaching / learning processes in the blended learning format.

Graph. 5: The Level of Satisfaction by the BLC

Source: Search data.

The assessment of the evaluation process also showed where improvements are needed. At the faculty level, it became clear how important the cooperation between the lecturers and the administration staff in the coordinated preparation of the curriculum in the blended learning format is. It should be mentioned, that the exclusive use of questionnaires does not permit any evaluation of statements made by students, such as insights into the changes in the learning process or how the articulation of the individual learning activities between offline time and self-learning phases of the learners can be implemented.

CONCLUSIONS

The very detailed evaluation process provides insights and answers, which, on the one hand, forms the basis for continuing and improving the flexible semester. The collected data allow right away an in-depth analysis of the BLC project on various levels (teachers and learners, learning platform, faculty). Well-known results could be reproduced: satisfaction of the students with the flexible time management and autonomy, but also their desire for more personal contact and the feeling of loneliness or for more feedbacks (SMYTH et al., 2012); the enrichment of the didactic skills of teachers (LAZARENKO, 2021) or, at the institutional level, the need to define and integrate the blended learning format into the educational process (GRAHAM et al., 2013).

On the other hand, this integrative evaluation procedure can be reconsidered and to be further developed. This enables a transfer to similar courses. However, it should be mentioned, that
certain questions without interviews with the students cannot be answered. Thus, in the next stages of cyclical development of the evaluation process the priorities should be defined.

This result clearly shows that effectiveness and satisfaction play a decisive role in the acceptance of the learners. In addition, even the students, who have learned less intensively with the BLC, want to continue learning with the BLC. It is particularly important for young learners, adolescents, and young adults, that the learning process and handling of learning materials in the online phase run smoothly. Only under these technical conditions the motivation to learn and the satisfaction factor with the learning content can be continuously maintained.

The strategic plan for the development of the pedagogical university for 2022 provides for the solution of a number of tasks, some of them are directly related to the intensification of the use of digital technologies in the educational process: development and improvement of information educational technologies used in the educational process; increasing the role of information technology and improving the educational and methodological base; strengthening the role of students’ independent work by creating conditions for independent access to educational resources and technologies of self-education.

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**Positive aspects and difficulties of teaching foreign languages in the blended learning course during COVID-19 pandemic**

**Resumo**

O objetivo da pesquisa é avaliar o processo de aprendizagem durante uma pandemia, dar feedback sobre o tema e promover uma compreensão mais profunda da importância dos resultados de um projeto de Curso de Aprendizagem Mesclada. Esse resultado mostra claramente que a efetividade e a satisfação desempenham um papel importante no envolvimento dos alunos no formato de aprendizagem. É óbvio que as possibilidades de aprendizagem auto-autônoma no BLC são significativamente ampliadas. Em geral, pode-se ver que o uso de formas inovadoras e tradicionais de educação possibilita obter um resultado muito melhor na formação de especialistas. A experiência da Universidade Pedagógica Estadual de Vinnytsia na implementação da aprendizagem mesclada mostra que a integração do sistema educacional tradicional com a e-learning é a mais eficaz. O plano estratégico para o desenvolvimento da Universidade Pedagógica para 2022 prevê a solução de uma série de tarefas que estão diretamente relacionadas à intensificação do uso de tecnologias digitais no processo educacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Aprendizado híbrido. Ensino de línguas estrangeiras. Avaliação. Plataforma online. Tecnologias digitais.

**Abstract**

The aim of the research is to assess the learning process during a pandemic, provide feedback on this issue and promote a deeper understanding of the importance of the results of a Blended Learning Course project. This result clearly shows that effectiveness and satisfaction play an important role in involving students in this format of learning. It is obvious that the possibilities of self/ autonomous learning in BLC are significantly expanded. In general, it can be seen that the use of innovative and traditional forms of education makes it possible to obtain a much better result in the training of specialists. The experience of Vinnytsia State Pedagogical University in the implementation of blended learning shows that the integration of the traditional education system with e-learning is the most effective. The strategic plan for the development of the Pedagogical University for 2022 provides for the solution of a number of tasks that are directly related to the intensification of the use of digital technologies in the educational process.

**Keywords:** Blended learning. Foreign language teaching. Assessment. Online platform. Digital technologies.

**Resumen**

El objetivo de la investigación es evaluar el proceso de aprendizaje durante una pandemia, proporcionar retroalimentación sobre este tema y promover una comprensión más profunda de la importancia de los resultados de un proyecto de Curso de Aprendizaje Combinado. Este resultado muestra claramente que la efectividad y la satisfacción juegan un papel importante en la participación de los estudiantes en este formato de aprendizaje. Es obvio que las posibilidades de autoaprendizaje / autónomo en BLC se amplían significativamente. En general, se puede ver que el uso de formas innovadoras y tradicionales de educación permite obtener un resultado mucho mejor en la formación de especialistas. La experiencia de la Universidad Pedagógica Estatal de Vinnytsia en la implementación del aprendizaje combinado muestra que la integración del sistema educativo tradicional con el aprendizaje electrónico es la más efectiva. El plan estratégico para el desarrollo de la Universidad Pedagógica para 2022 prevé la solución de una serie de tareas que están directamente relacionadas con la intensificación del uso de las tecnologías digitales en el proceso educativo.

**Palabras-clave:** Aprendizaje semipresencial. Enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. Evaluación. Plataforma online. Tecnologías digitales.