The Increasing Need for Blended-Learning Models in Courses of English for Specific Courses in Romanian Universities

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Abstract

Unlike many academic subjects, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching and learning presents challenges from the start: a new language, new vocabulary, unrecognizable words, unfamiliar sounds, grammar explanations, and of course the expectation for students to actually say something and many other problems related to learning for authentic communication in English as well as offering students a specialised English course. As a result, today ESP teachers are searching continually for new resources and materials that can offer genuine instructional assistance throughout the language-learning process. Over the past few years, blended-learning (BL) has been a popular topic in English Language Teaching (ELT) but it has expanded in many other academic subjects due to its usefulness. Recent studies indicate that blended-learning technology into ESP classes produces two significant results, namely (a) students learn quicker and better through a virtual learning environment (VLE) which is learning flexible, offering them autonomy and self-pacing according to their interests and needs and (b) teachers have more time to do what they do best, i.e. use the rich resources of the classroom to provide interesting lessons. Even so, some teachers choose to only use BL techniques, while others argue that it is problematic and offers nothing new. In both cases, more discussion on BL is required by stimulating debate and action research. In this context, this paper describes how effective the blended-learning methodology is in the context of an ESP course for adult students in long-life learning education system within an engineering faculty, how well the technological support works both on the part of the teacher/tutor and that of the students, issues about its implementation and partial results in the piloting of its first module.

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1. Paper rationale

In higher education, it seems that the number of universities using blended courses is growing rapidly. Some estimates are that between 80 and 90% of the course will someday be hybrid [1]. Busy students like the ability to access course materials anytime, anyplace and they are positive about the convenience and flexibility these blended courses provide them. Moreover, many students are older and working, such as the adult students in long-life learning education system, and blended courses help provide them with the flexibility they need to balance school, family life and work. Furthermore, blended-learning pedagogical model for teaching and learning ESP successfully through a virtual environment requires indeed a real effort to redesign an ESP course in which face-to-face teacher-led classes, an online platform monitoring and the cooperation between the instructional designers and the software engineers contribute to the creation of a more effective final product. That is why we argue for the need for integrating technology into language courses to provide pedagogically sound and interesting lessons and a blended learning approach can certainly enrich the language learning experience of our students. In this paper we use theoretical frameworks and real life data to help our understanding of blended learning in practice and the way it fits the Romanian universities.

An experimental blended-learning project to teach ESP learners was started in 2011 and it is still running within British Council Romania. This English program aims to develop integrated language skills with a focus on learning for authentic communication, and later to develop it into English for Specific Purposes, namely Criminal Justice Project (CJP). It was a completely new challenge not only for the teachers involved in the project but also for the learners, people working in the judiciary system. The most important thing about this project was the blended-learning (b-learning) methodology used to create it. The program has been implemented in a blended-learning pedagogical model that includes: (a) learners’ work with Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), software conceived as the backbone of the entire CJP program; (b) online monitoring; (c) face-to-face EFL teacher-led classes

The results have been excellent and have showed that this language learning project has developed a positive attitude towards the target language besides its efficiency about learning and performance. This experience of a b-learning pedagogical model inspired us to create, in turn, a course in ESP at our University. In the light of this we decided during the academic year 2011-2012 to apply part of the experience gained in the project run by the British Council and in spring we started with a pilot group of 10-12 students, adult students in long-life learning education system, within an engineering faculty. They were given an initial placement test and they were scored as being of pre-intermediate and intermediate level according to Common European framework of reference for languages [2]. The small size of the group was chosen in order to optimize interaction and to stimulate active participation. The paper details in what follows the didactic development from an old, traditional face-to face English course to the online platform design and the cooperation between teachers of English and the software engineers

2. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

The term “blended learning” is a buzz term, yet one that means different things to different people. The ‘classic’ definition of blended learning is a course consisting of traditional ‘face-to-face’ language lessons, combined with ‘distance learning’, i.e. the opportunity to study ‘beyond the classroom’. Such a course can provide many benefits for language learners. In their book, Barrett and Sharma [3] suggest a broader definition, taking blended learning to mean a combination of classroom teaching and the appropriate use of technology. Technology such as an interactive whiteboard can be used inside the classroom to enrich the learning experience. In addition, the students could have 24/7 access to their interactive learning materials, allowing them to study at
anytime, anywhere. Whatever definition is used, new technology has had a major impact on language teaching and learning and there are many ways to integrate it into a language course. Within the context of blended courses, this definition can be related to the combination of web and face-to-face that is necessary to produce a course using the best of both instructional worlds. Some educators define blended learning approaches as “finding a harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction” [4].

As with all new terms that have emerged there is no established definition of blended learning. Smith [5] defines blended learning thus “A method of educating at a distance that uses technology (high-tech, such as television and the Internet or low-tech, such as voice mail or conference calls) combined with traditional (or, stand-up) education or training”. However, Procter [6] argues that identifying blended learning with distance-learning is a mistake that has significant implications for program design and delivery and he gives a simpler definition of blended learning as being “an effective combination of modes of delivery including e-learning.”

3. Methodology

To start with, the online software was the first step we had to undertake in order to create a complete new tailor-made platform. This represents the most innovative element of this new course on blended-learning English course. The online software created is an interactive multimedia environment which houses all the materials and information communication technology (ICT) tools that learners need in the web platform. Moreover, students are encouraged to develop their autonomous learning abilities and to work towards fulfilling their language learning goals.

Secondly, we conceived the whole program as made up of two main language areas, namely General English and the ESP in Engineering field, intermingled in four modules of 90 minutes, and also implemented in the web platform. The complete program lasts for an academic year and the students meet the tutor every fortnight after autonomous online study, following a guided learning path suggested by the tutor. Each meeting lasts 6 hours and has 4 modules of 90 minutes of interactive language learning tasks. The third module out of the four is the one related to ESP in Engineering field.

The linguistic competence level to be achieved at the end of the course has been determined in line with the levels of the Common European Framework. Learners are therefore expected to reach an ‘independent user’ B-1 level, although a B-2 level might also be expected for the very few good and hardworking learners.

The main objective of the program is to improve the students’ knowledge of ESL as well as of the specific vocabulary related to their expertise area. To create the contents for both face-to-face and online course we use materials according to the need to present specific vocabulary in its real context of use. Moreover, each assignment is divided into activities containing exercises covering reading, listening and writing. The student is introduced to the specific vocabulary initially, through reading and listening of texts with exercises aiming at getting familiar with the new words and phrases. For this stage, we choose texts to be read or listened to, sometimes presented in PowerPoint slides and the students can deduce the meaning of new words from the specific context which is very useful for the language acquisition. Then, through exercises, the students have to check what they have previously acquired. The types of exercises are with closed answers such as fill-in, multiple choice, true/false and matching, and also with open answers, for example questions and discussion or forum exercises. The feedback is given by the tutor who corrects the exercises and also evaluates the participation in the class discussions and in the forum. In addition, each lesson is provided with supplementary tools such as a contextualized glossary, accessible both as a general linked list of specific words connected to the module, as a help to understanding reading or listening texts.
4. Results

We have already applied a satisfaction survey at the end of the academic year 2011-2012, before the summer holidays. The results expressed in average percentages are displayed in the chart in the appendix A and B. The questions focused on a b-learning system, autonomy, motivation, teachers, face-to-face classes, feedback, achievement of learning goals, assessment, time allotment and so on. As can be seen, the overall results are favourable, showing a high level of satisfaction. We also noted on different occasions, informal discussions, that what the students appreciate most are the opportunity to communicate quickly with the tutor via e-mail, the less time spent attending classes, good student rapport and they all express their wish to attend another blended-learning course after this experience. However, there is some negative feedback related to the time allocated per progress tests: 37% of the students felt they needed more time to finish the progress tests. Another drawback was given by some technical issues and their straight functionality (access, navigation, etc.) and poor use of discussion boards.

5. Discussions

The results obtained with the pilot group show a substantial improvement in the students’ language skills, as well as high satisfaction levels with the entire English program. Moreover, they support the success of the BL model implemented and reflect the efforts of the team over a year to create an online interactive multimedia language learning environment. Most efficiency is achieved in the face-to-face sessions as well as online discussion boards but greater efficiency would be achieved through encouraging students to support each other through discussion boards or discussions on forum. For example, if a question and the answer are complex, the students do not have to wait until they have a chance to speak to the teacher, but can get help and continue with their work.

6. Conclusions

Our findings are limited to a period of less than one year of experience and we admit that the course has room for improvement and there is still a lack of experience amongst both staff and students with regard to a blended-learning English course. Nevertheless, we believe that being able to see both the practical side of the course and further reflect on the course is a major step forward for our understanding of blended-learning methodology. The results obtained with the pilot group give us new hopes to believe that blended-learning courses provide the learners with a real chance to experience independent learning and, what is also important, blended-learning model is a sure step towards life long learning.

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Appendix A.

1. Please give us some general feedback on your course:

The level of my class is:  too difficult (10%)  about right (68%)  too easy (22%)

Overall my classes are:  very useful (88.9%)  useful (11.1%)  not very useful  not useful at all

I am making … of progress:  a lot (94%)  quite a lot (6%)  not much  none at all

This is because:  my teacher, the textbook, good exercises on the VLE, good teaching methods, elements of fun, wide range of activities (the students’ answers)

2. Self-evaluation – please grade yourself and choose two things to focus on:

|                   | Very confident | Quite confident | Not very confident | My priorities are … |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Grammatical accuracy | 56.5%          | 11.5%          | 32%                | 61%               |
| Fluency           | 3.3%           | 67.7%          | 29%                | 27%               |
| Vocabulary        | 72%            | 18%            |                    |                   |
| Reading           | 88%            | 12%            |                    |                   |
| Writing           | 17%            | 41%            | 42%                | 12%               |
| Listening         | 97%            |                |                    |                   |
| Speaking          | 27%            | 58%            | 15%                |                   |
| General           | 78%            | 22%            |                    |                   |

My strategies to improve are: improving my fluency in speaking, listening to more English TV programmes and videos, writing more in English, acquiring a complete sense of grammar, writing more in English, chatting in English with my mates online.

3. Class and teacher evaluation – please show how far you agree with these statements:

| Statement                                      | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|------------------|
| I feel motivated to participate in class       | 92%            | 8%    |                            |          |                  |
| The lessons on the course link together well  | 77%            | 23%   |                            |          |                  |
| My teacher uses a range of learning technologies, e.g. the Internet, videos | 89%            | 11%   |                            |          |                  |
| My teacher explains language well, e.g. vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation | 98%            |       |                            |          |                  |
| My teacher helps me develop ways to learn English better | 85%            | 15%   |                            |          |                  |
| My teacher plans lessons that help me develop my skills | 88.9%          | 11%   |                            |          |                  |
Appendix B.

Your opinions and views are very important to us and will help to shape the future development of this course. Please take a few minutes to complete the following form as fully as you think appropriate. Comment on the following:

1. **Pre-course information about online environment** (enrolment procedures etc.)
   - poor  OK  good  very good  excellent  additional comments
   - 23%  65%  12%

2. **The online learning environment** (ease of access, ease of use, quality of access instructions)
   - poor  OK  good  very good  excellent  additional comments
   - 15%  56%  29%

3. **Online course materials** (including level of challenge, pace and practical application of skills focused on, any activities you particularly liked/disliked, clarity of instructions)
   - poor  OK  good  very good  excellent  additional comments
   - 12%  43%  45%

4. **Your own performance and impressions of online learning** (Did I log on regularly enough? What difficulties did I have? How could I have benefited from the online material?)
   - poor  OK  good  very good  excellent  additional comments
   - 15%  56%  29%