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Creating new opportunities for Language Learners: “Blended Learning Solution” (A case study implemented with mixed ability students in the Language Centre, SEEU- Skopje)

Neda Radosavlevikj ^{a*}, SEEU, Macedonia, The Former Yugoslav Republic Of

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss how blended learning can create new opportunities for my students with mixed abilities that come from different cultural and educational backgrounds. In my case study I compare the traditional with the blended learning class. The description of the case, are two groups the pre-intermediate, intermediate reading/writing class who are introduced with learning English in 50 minutes of traditional environment and 50 minutes in a computer mediated classroom for the period of one semester. I found useful to use Facebook as a tool that helped me introduce self-study resources designed for study in class. Furthermore, I analyzed the student behavior and at the end of each class. As well as which environment they preferred more traditional or on-line. Students' progress was measured in each class and I gave points for each activity.

Keywords: blended learning model; students' attitude and motivation; self-directed activities; independent study

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Neda Radosavlevikj**, SEEU, Macedonia, The Former Yugoslav Republic Of.
E-Mail Address: n.radosavleviq@seeu.edu.mk / Tel: +389 44 356 000

1. Introduction

Blended learning, an approach that includes a mixture of online and face-to-face communication, is an increasingly popular method of content delivery in higher education, often also called hybrid learning. The primary advantage of blended learning is the potential to incorporate the strengths of synchronous and asynchronous learning (Ho et al., 2006; Vaughan, 2007). For instance, some learning is completed in the classroom and some in a digital context away from the classroom. The approach encourages a community of inquiry that allows learners to connect and collaborate with their peers and to create "a learning environment that integrates social, cognitive and teaching elements that in a way will precipitate and sustain reflection and discourse" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

There are many ways to teach a language just what is the best way to involve our students in tension free environment as well as create opportunities for independent study. As teachers, we are aware that most of the teaching practices take place in a traditional classroom setting and creating new opportunities for optimal language learning poses a challenge for students. Although we tend to introduce communicative and authentic materials in the classroom sometimes we face limited chances for our students to actively participate in using the target language.

Furthermore, in my situation I encounter difficulties in the classroom especially because my students come from various cultural environments and with different educational backgrounds. This group of students was with mix-abilities, have individual learning preferences as well as different goals and learning styles. Students were introduced with learning English both in traditional environment and in a computer mediated classroom for the period of one semester. The management system that I used was Facebook because the university management system "Libri" was not efficient enough to be used in and outside the classroom. Students showed great interest for the study and their progress was measured in each class. For this study, I used students' interviews to find out about their preferred style as well as students' questionnaires about where were students more motivated in traditional or digital setting.

Questions that are study of this research are the following:

1. How blended learning influence on student motivation for learning a foreign language? What is the students' attitude toward blended learning approach?
2. What are students' reactions when I implemented blended learning approach in class? Were they more motivated in traditional or digital classroom?
3. What is the teacher's role in creating optimal conditions for learning the target language?
4. What is students' satisfaction in using blended learning approach in and outside the classroom? Are students motivated to use the self-study resources at home and to which degree can help in developing autonomous learners?

According to the research study and analysis of the results it is expected that blended learning influences positively regarding motivation for learning a foreign language, increasing the level of language competence among students, increasing the level of reading and writing skills and developing autonomous learning.

2. Experiencing a Blended Solution in mix-ability class and creating "optimal conditions" for learning the target language

Blended solution can maintain the optimal learning environment. The optimal learning environment includes learners involved with authentic tasks and interacting among themselves in order to achieve progress and produce creative language. Learners should be autonomous, socially active, work in relaxed atmosphere, have enough time to complete the tasks and receive appropriate feedback. It is up to the teacher to find the right "blend solution" and provide conditions for students to enjoy in the new setting.

The research shows that there is a shift in higher education in terms of course content delivery, instruction, and teacher-learner interaction that occurs as a combination of both face-to-face and online

content. "The carefully designed synthesis of online and face-to-face learning incorporating a range of media based upon a sound constructional pedagogical framework" (Buckley, Pitt, Norton, & Owens, 2010, p.57). Blended learning is a form that ranges 50-50 percentages from mostly face-to-face to mostly online. "Learner self-direction, active involvement, and motivation are critical" (Johnson, 2014, p.24).

The focus is given to the learner and the teacher is a learning environment designer. Students are trained to become more autonomous in their learning and teachers should support their intellectual growth encouraging them to get interested in social issues in order to become productive members of the society. In that way students develop critical thinking skills and become more productive lifelong learners.

There are factors and criteria that should be examined as well as to be taken in consideration as to what are the roles of both teachers and students in an effective blended learning setting.

Good teaching involves active role of both teachers and students in every context as well as the use of various methods, approaches and strategies for developing maximum knowledge in the target language. Teachers are the ones that use the methods and approaches and it is the student that should make use of different combinations that will help in learning the foreign language. It is a fact that it is necessary to revise the curricula as well as the instructional and advising practices in order to set the right climate for improving student learning skills. "Students should become independent learners and learn how to think, produce and evaluate knowledge, providing the basis for lifelong, independent learning" (Rury, 1996, p.2).

Moreover, combination of face-to-face and online lecturing, good programs, seminars, lectures, projects can also help students and offer them different learning opportunities. This blended approach appeared in 2000 and today it is a significant term that refers to various methods, learning styles in order to make progressive an productive environment for students that will be able to use and benefit from the tools and resources used in the digital environment with optimal conditions provided.

The growth of the technology, especially the use of Internet and Web based communication such as social networks: Facebook gives learners opportunities to find the appropriate mix of teaching and learning styles. Blended learning can provide individual experience and personalized learning. The use of software management software such as Facebook facilitates the use of blended approach in the classroom. Students are challenged and encouraged to use messaging, discussion forums, practice and give their opinions answers to a specific particular topic. In order to develop in individual learning students can use their Facebook account to develop their own blogs for reflection of their writings then share it with their peers and receive feedback. In this way both teachers and students use communicative, collaborative learning for self assessment as well as peer assessment. Students can be also involved in other students' work, comment, give opinions and in that way engage in the community of inquiry in and outside the classroom.

In addition, the online environment can enrich the ideas and stimulates creativity in students as well as help them develop critical minds. The combination of both traditional and online settings can be an effective solution. The software management system is a tool that should be implemented in every higher educational institution so it is very possible that we will have very little face-to-face contact in the near future. If there is no such management system then Facebook can be used as a social network that can connect learners. The teaching will be supported digitally and educational institutions must find a flexible solution and will require mixing and looking for the Right Blend solution.

3. Learning in a Blended Learning Environment

Motivating and involving students in learning in blended Learning Environment

The level of motivation is very important in an EFL classroom. The teacher should possess some specific qualities; consider his/her personal characteristics and behavior, classroom management practices, and the materials and tasks used in the classroom. These motivational techniques affect students' behavior, their engagement, success and overall relaxing atmosphere. Other ways that motivate students include positive behavior of the teacher, appealing activities and technology used in the classroom as well as effective classroom management.

"Astin's theory of student involvement encouraged teachers to focus their attention on how motivated students seemed and how much time and energy they devoted to learning rather than what they accomplished" (1999, p.31). Involving students in the process of learning collaborating with each other increases the learning dynamic. Student motivation and involvement is always a question when implementing a blended learning model. The participation of the students and motivation outside the classroom rather than only using the resources and course content or the techniques used is a question of major concern when it comes to blended learning approach. The interaction of the students with each other (peer-assessment) as well as teacher-student interaction is also matter of student involvement, dedicated time and effort as well as investment in learning tasks. If students successfully participate in a computer lab while the blended learning content is delivered, the progress and improving the language skills may result in motivation and satisfaction to continue to study as an independent learner. "Engaging the students in an online environment means quality of effort and involvement in productive learning activities" (Kuh, 2009, p.31). In my present study students showed interest and were motivated to become engaged with blended learning. Although new for them, the involvement in the computer lab activities and the interest of the students were very high.

According to my research blended learning met my students' needs and students' motivation, participation during the course was higher than the courses with only F2F mode. Cooperative learning and participation also increased students' proficiency. More active involvement is possible but it also depends a lot on the skills, attitude, behavior, techniques, authority, engaging and interesting activities of the teacher but also students in delivering effective and successful online platform with both sides equally involved.

4. Methodology

In my study I describe two different classes where I introduced a blended learning solution in order to help these students achieve better results learning the target language.

Furthermore, with both groups pre-intermediate and intermediate level students (53 students) I created interesting activities that I used in the traditional classroom and self-study materials for independent study that I used in the computer lab-the digital classroom. It was important to select an appropriate task for their level and also experience the task both in face-to-face environment and in a computer classroom. Most of the students enjoyed the digital classroom and it created optimal conditions for students to exercise and improve their language skills. Students could work on exercises depending both on their previous knowledge as well as individual preferences and learning styles.

As I taught I tried to monitor the whole process and help if necessary in individual cases. In my classes I faced few students where the language level of the activity was too easy, however, most of the students used the self-study activities to exercise and improve their previous language skills, to progress in learning the language and achieve better results-scores.

It is a fact that the time was limited in the classroom, so that is why I used 50 minutes in traditional and 50 minutes in a digital classroom for practicing so that if students are motivated could also use all the tools and resources at home for their independent time for studying. In that way, I managed to create an optimal environment where students were engaged both face-to-face and online.

In both classrooms digital and traditional I employ team and pair work, collaborative language learning and independent learning as well as train students how to become more independent learners and how to use the self-study resources for their individual learning at home.

In order to benefit both teachers and students must implement the right blended learning solution in the classroom and provide rich learning environment. In that way, technology will play the main role in the process on teaching and learning and students will be expected to exercise the language in and out of the classroom.

5. Findings and Results

In my blended learning class I used the time effectively and provided students with clear course plan. For both my course sessions pre-intermediate and intermediate level students was given a syllabus with clear course schedule and the time planned for the 4 Units, (13 teaching weeks, 7-face-to face sessions ,6 online classes, 50 minutes per class). Moreover, I trained my students during the course how to use the self-study materials in class so then they could use it at home for independent study time. They could also use the activities for Quiz revision and Final Test revision. I also encouraged weaker students to do all the necessary activities in class and then exercise it at home.

All the results from the course activities were examined and I gave points for the exercises done in class, in a computer lab. The results from the traditional and digital classroom were compared and it was concluded that blended learning can achieve optimal results for Basic English skills course (pre-intermediate and intermediate levels). Students were asked to complete a survey so that I could find out what motivated them more the traditional or the digital environment. Each class students were given this handout in order to measure where they were more motivated to learn.

I compared the results from the survey and they showed that 18,9% strongly agreed that they learned more from the traditional model and 49,1% strongly agreed that they learned more in the digital environment. The results are equal when it comes to which model students prefer 52,8% strongly agreed they liked the digital model and the same 52,8 % somewhat agree they like better the traditional model. The topics introduced in class were more interesting in the digital class 56,6% while only 22,6 % in the traditional model.

The second questionnaire is blended learning pre and post questionnaire and 79 students from pre-intermediate and intermediate levels completed this questionnaire. In my blended learning class the combination of the traditional face-to-face and online modern model motivated students to perform the tasks and stimulate their practical work. They relied on-the knowledge management system LIBRI and they expressed interest in using Discussion Forums (32%), more than Face-to-Face discussion only 26 %. They showed more interest in taking the courses on line 80 % answered positively. They also agreed strongly (70 %) that it will be better if they have combined classes, for instance 50 minutes in class and 50 minutes in a computer lab. They felt comfortable to use the materials online (82 %) and indicated that it would be very useful to receive feedback from their peers online (70 %) and attend scheduled classes face-to –face once per week instead of coming to class two or three times per week (64 %). Students said that they would like to be assessed on weekly basis (42 %), by self-assessment (20 %), weekly quizzes (28 %), weekly assignments (8 %), and combined on line work (2 %). Overall, the results of the survey showed that students would value a blended or hybrid learning approach.

The results from the blended learning post questionnaire showed that 50% liked the Facebook online activities done in class and 80% answered that the online activities helped them learn English. However, 70% strongly agreed that they liked all the classroom activities and 80% revealed that they help them improve their English. 70% strongly agreed that the combination of online and classroom activities worked well together and 90% strongly agreed that the teacher was very supportive and gave clear technical instructions. 70% of the students are motivated to use computers when learning English and 60% said that using exercises on internet motivates them to learn English.

6. Conclusion

The study shows that both groups pre-intermediate and intermediate level were highly motivated to use simultaneously both face-to-face (traditional) and digital classroom environment. According to Carl Rogers "...any significant learning involves a certain amount of pain..." (1969). It was concluded from the research that technology can sometimes cause barriers and problems to students and teachers. Students involved in the blended learning activities had divided opinion about using technology in the classroom. It is a fact that only deeply committed learners would find a way to complete the learning objectives of the course.

The challenge for me as teacher was to create a positive environment for learning English as a foreign language. I was enthusiastic to use Blended Learning as a way to challenge and encourage my students to effectively use both methods traditional and online and choose their best way to learn.

Students that experienced blended learning managed to improve their learning skills. However, not every student was encouraged to use the online activities, still as a teacher I believe that most students will need support especially students with low self-directed skills and those who are not positive to commit to the learning group.

I can also conclude that at the early stages of the new learning strategy blended learning students were more confident and committed, however as their competences improved the learning process was less productive.

The purpose of the study was to show conceptions for blended Learning for students that are new and experienced this method during the course. Moreover, to point the way to further investigation on how students can be introduced to blended learning approach when learning English.

This study raises many questions to be answered. How can we use blended learning and apply it in Higher education institutions as well as how can we motivate students to become self-directed and how best can we identify students' attitudes, skills for blended learning so that the learning, teaching strategies can be adapted to their previous experience and future needs.

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APPENDIX 1

BLENDED LEARNING PRE -QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION ONE

1. How much do you use computers daily? *

- 1 hour
- 2-5 hours
- more than 8 hours

2. Would you like to take courses on computer? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

3. Would you bring your computer in the classroom? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

4. Would you like to take on-line courses? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

5. Are computers useful at SEEU? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

6. Do we have enough computers at SEEU? *

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- Maybe

7. How important are today computers in our society? *

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Not important
- I don't like using computers

8. Would you like to take combined classes 50 min. in class, 50 minutes on computer lab? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

SECTION TWO

9. Would you like to be able to select your own courses in English? *

- Yes, very much
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

10. Would you like to take elective courses after the required English courses? *

- Yes, very much
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

11. What would you like better? *

- courses on-line
- courses in class
- combined model (in-class and on-line)
- I don't know

12. Would you prefer to communicate from home on a computer than come to class regularly? *

- Yes, very much
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

13. What would you like the most? You can choose more than one *

- Discussion Forums
- Writing e-mails
- Workshops/Seminars

- Face-to face communication

14. What courses would you like to take as electives? *

- Drama
- Computer related courses
- Academic English
- Public Speech
- Language and Culture
- Basic English Skills

SECTION THREE

15. Can internet improve your English skills? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

16. Do you think that courses can be improved by creating assignments or lectures by the use of Internet? *

- No
- Yes, but I haven't tried that yet
- Yes, but at home I don't have internet
- Yes, I have tried this

17. Do you use computers to complete your assignments? *

- Yes
- Only for my purposes
- I often copy-paste from Internet
- No, I do my assignments individually without the use of Internet

18. Do you think it will be more useful to have materials on-line? *

- Yes, I am comfortable using it
- No, I am not comfortable using it

- I don't know

19. Do you agree with the statement ' It is more important to be able to use teaching materials on-line instead of coming to class'? *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- I don't know

20. Do you think our programs in English are well organized? *

- Yes, very much
- No
- should be improved
- I don't know

21. Blended learning is : *

- combined learning applying traditional and modern technology
- traditional way of teaching
- modern way of teaching
- I don't know what it means

22. Would it be better if you have classes once a week (per group) instead of 2, 3 times per week? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

23. Can we make the process of learning easier by using Blended Learning? (combined - traditional and modern on-line learning) *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

24. Do you think it would be better to take the exam on the computer? *

- Strongly agree

- Agree
- Disagree
- I don't know

25. Do you think it will be better if the time for the class is scheduled on line, students don't have to come to class? *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- I don't know

26. Would you like to receive feedback from another student on-line? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

27. What kind of materials would you use on-line? *

you may choose more than one answer

- Lesson Plans
- Discussion Forums
- useful websites
- Facebook

28. How would you like to be assessed? *

You may choose more than one answer

- on weekly basis
- self-assessment
- weekly quizzes
- weekly assignments
- collaborative on-line work

29. Would you like to have more classes in computer lab than in the classroom? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

- I don't know

APPENDIX 2

Post-questionnaire on Blended Learning

1. I like the facebook online activities that were done in class

Somewhat agree

Neither agree or disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

2. The online activities helped me learn more English

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

3. I liked learning in the computer lab

Strongly agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

4. I liked all the classroom activities

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

5. The classroom activities helped me learn and improve my English

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

6. I liked learning in the classroom

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

7. The course improved my reading skills

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

8. The course improved my speaking skills

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

9. This course improved my writing skills

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

10. This course improved my listening skills

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

11. There was a good balance between online facebook activities and classroom activities

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

12. The online and classroom activities worked well together

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

13. The teacher was very supportive and gave clear technical instruction

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

14. I liked my English courses to be taught like this course

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

15. The mixed online and classroom activities improved my English

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

16. The teacher created a positive atmosphere when teaching online

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

17. Please describe your computer skills?

Expert

Very good

Medium

Beginner

Inexperienced

18. I use the computer

Every day

Every 2/3 days

Weekly

Rarely

Hardly ever

Never

19. For what purpose you use the computer

to type a document

to send an email

to send an attachment

to prepare Power point presentations

to play videogame

to download music

to put photos on facebook, instagram

to search for information on internet

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to listen to music

to watch movies

to save notes

to create a website

20. What are your main motivates me in learning English:

I like using computers

I don't like using computers

I use computers for searching materials

I don't use computers for searching materials

Computers are the necessity for learning English

Computers don't help me learn English

Exercises on internet motivate me a lot to learn English

Exercises on internet don't motivate me to learn English

I can't live without the use of Computer

21. Explain shortly do you believe that computers are the future and help learning English more effectively?

Short Biography

Neda Radosavlevikj is a Senior Lecturer at South East European University in the Language Centre. She teaches General English skills with various level groups and ESP courses. Her interests include improving teaching skills as well as Curriculum development by utilizing modern methodology and technology, IT skills and design courses on-line.