Blended Learning and MyEnglishLab Application as a Powerful Tool Leading Towards Autonomy in the Process of Learning English Language Targeting and Activating Both Brain Hemispheres

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Abstract

The benefits of blended learning encouraging students to become more active, autonomous, self–esteemed and responsible for their own approach to learning and self-perception as a student are obvious. As educators we find student engagement in the process of learning as a key factor to exploitation of provided learning. Basically, the more student engagement there is, the better results occur. As we understand blended learning, it does not mean the reduction of a face-to-face and person-to-person contact time spent in a classroom, but at the same time it means a greater demand on engagement and participation of learners. Choosing the right tool for blended learning is also challenging, neglecting the fact that most of such tools meet demands to create, add or adjust the content to teacher´s or course needs, which can be considered as highly professional and very time-consuming work. In the article we give reasons and show that MyEnglishLab application is the ideal combination of all requirements of an up-to-date blended tool combining mobility and accessibility on the one hand, and a highly attractive content customized with the paper printed materials (textbooks) on the other hand. MyEnglishLab activities and exercises, generally the content itself, provide such a wide range that stimulates either the right or left brain hemispheres. Our results with teaching adult learners at the University of Hradec Kralove show students´ preferences of using logical thinking, i.e. activated left hemisphere. Since MyEnglishLab application appears as an open application, in the article we also discuss troubling language issues from the Czech student´s point of view, and we give examples of different exercises targeting and activating both brain hemispheres whose activation or cooperation significantly influence learners´ outcomes.

Keywords: blended learning; MyEnglishLab; multimedia application; adult learners; graphs and puzzles;

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1. Introduction

The paper summarizes the main attributes and benefits of blended learning and the teacher´s role as seen today in the course of advancing time. Then it presents and describes the contribution of MyEnglishLab component to blended learning, its three main elements and their characteristics. The paper also mentions some examples of different ways how to exploit MyEnglishLab to enhance students´ learning style preferences targeting and activating both brain hemispheres, each of which is responsible for different brain processes.

2. Blended learning

2.1. Definition and benefits

The Online Learning Consortium, formerly called the Sloan Consortium, defined blended learning as "learning which integrates online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner". Although there could be disputes about what pedagogically valuable manner is, it is clear that blended education uses online technology. Blended learning is also named as Computer assisted learning, Hybrid learning, Flipped classroom, Flexible learning. Different versions of course management system applications are used; e.g. Moodle, Blackboard, Edmodo, Schoology, Mahara and many others.

Choosing the right tool for blended learning is quite tricky and challenging, neglecting the fact that most of such content management systems meet demands to create, add or adjust the content to different teacher´s or course needs, which can be considered as very demanding, highly professional and especially very time-consuming work. All the aspects can be a real obstacle for teachers, especially for those born before 1980 which is the date associated with term a digital immigrant referring to an individual who has not been exposed to using digital technologies from their childhood (Prensky, 2001), and therefore they might not get very familiar with the use of digital technologies. In his article Prensky also says that the arrival and dissemination of digital technology in the last decade of the 20th century changed the way students think and process information making it difficult for them to excel academically using the outdated teaching methods of the day (Prensky, 2001). The truth is that many teachers – digital immigrants try to avoid using digital technologies unless it is absolutely necessary.

Today´s learners not only cannot imagine their lives without a technology in their hands, they cannot live without it. Therefore, they not only use different types of digital technology daily, but they expect technological tools in their education as a natural part of the educational process. Students do not want to feel going to school like going back in time. Even more, they can state a question asking how they can trust information provided by their educators while they are using such outdated technology meaning only a blackboard and chalk. Eventually, the gap between students´ expectations and teachers´ course managements gets bigger.

When speaking about the use of digital technologies, some teachers can oppose that not everything around us is digital. As a famous British-Sri Lankan science-fiction writer Arthur Clarke once said that any teacher that can be replaced by a computer should be. This means that good teachers are always here to stay and be loved by their students.

Blended learning takes advantages of both the teacher-supported learning and autonomous learning, reflects real life more intensively, provides teachers tools to make their teaching more attractive to learners and more engaging. The more engaged students are, the better results they reach as well as motivation for further work not only in the classroom, but any time and any place they are.

2.2. Teacher´s role

In the modern world of everyday use of digital technologies a teacher is not expected to be a perfect, unmistakable and the absolute source of information and knowledge, a walking encyclopaedia. The teacher is not the authority in the class anymore. S/he is a kind of facilitator, advisor or mentor (Frydrychova, 2014). Thus, the teacher is expected;

- To follow the school curriculum, provide a framework and manage the class.
- To support and encourage learners.
- To create a good social learning environment.
- To prepare communication activities for the face-to-face interaction.
- To answer questions as they arise.
- To set up homework.
- To correct mistakes.
- To monitor students´ progress.
- To evaluate learners and their progress.

The combination of all above mentioned issues seems to be ideal.

3. MyEnglishLab component and its contribution to blended learning

3.1. Introducing MyEnglishLab

MyEnglishLab is an online component designed to complement various English language courses for paper-printed coursebooks, e.g. Speakout, Top Notch, New Total English, Choices, Market Leader etc. developed by Pearson Longman. It is a web-based system providing learners 24/7 (i.e. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week) online access to the teacher-managed course content.

As an online technology with combination of face-to-face learning it covers both.

- Solitary and social approach.
- Autonomous and supported approach.

Taking advantages of the combination of both ways MyEnglishLab is appealing to different types of learners too – visual, auditory and kinesthetic. MyEnglishLab includes a multi-dimensional and multi-modal approach to learning. Students learn through text, images, sound, video, animation. Thanks to all possibilities that MyEnglishLab enables, teachers can customize course content for any individual learner or a group of learners.

In addition to MyEnglishLab component teachers can also use a digital version of the student´s coursebook – ActiveTeach with DVD with plenty of interactive activities and Interactive whiteboard tools.

3.2. Contribution of MyEnglishLab to blended learning

There are basically three contributions of MyEnglishLab to blended learning:

- Enriched learning.

- Informed teaching.

- Flexibility.

Firstly, enriched learning includes interactive activities, tasks and tests integrated with the course content. Enriched learning refers to a variety of activities targeting all language skills in very attractive ways raising students´ interest in a subject matter and students´ engagement in the learning process. It is obvious that the more engaged students are the more they are likely to learn and gain from learning process. Enriched learning also refers to up-to-date and top quality of learning materials and activities. MyEnglishLab activities also give tips to help learners study the subject matter as many times they need and direct them to appropriate reference pages. There are also hint boxes that provide clues to complete tasks properly. These facilities encourage students to think and analyze what they are doing rather than guessing answers, they make students think and answer consciously. Learners are given the feedback on their work immediately with the help of automatic grading that also enables them to see their progress.

Secondly, it is informed teaching that helps teachers follow their students´ progress, achievements and success. Formerly, this could be done by marking students´ homework or by marking/evaluating their tests. As for homework, teachers could never be sure whether it had been done at home, by somebody else or with help of anybody else with better knowledge and without a particular student´s participation in doing the homework. Even more, marking homework or tests is very time-consuming, and not exceptionally teachers prefer students to mark each other´s homework in lessons, and they rather reduce the number of tests to avoid marking them. Once homework and tests are marked and corrected, it always takes some time to determine areas of difficulty and student´s weaknesses. MyEnglishLab enables to mark students´ homework automatically. To see which errors are the most common and which particular students make which mistakes can be read in the Common Error Report.

Thirdly, it is flexibility that can be achieved through MyEnglishLab easily. These days students have different needs, different weaknesses they have to deal with. MyEnglishLab enables to target and assign activities either to individual learners or a group of learners according to their needs. Flexibility also includes an easy communication outside the classroom. The teacher can communicate with students sending them messages through the application. Let us not forget that learners can access all the activities when they are online anytime and anywhere. (Retrieved from http://myenglishlab.com/members/online-presentation-recordings.html by Rob Dean)

MyEnglishLab together with ActiveTeach appear as an open application. As the result the teacher can attach any documents from previously prepared files, or any links to web sites, including youtube and others. Through this an unlimited range of various sources of information and activities is available.

3.3. MyEnglishLab and the research

MyEnglishLab component complementing English language courses has not been used for long. The initial introduction within the Czech Republic goes back to 2011/2012. Although the number of users

has increased since then, due to a short period use hardly any researches based on data from Czech users can be found. Unfortunately, similar situation can be traced in other countries. Currently, Pearson is still encouraging users to participate in efficacy studies. Some studies and MyEnglishLab efficacy results can be read on Pearson website provided by Pearson.

The Faculty of Science, University of Hradec Kralove has been using MyEnglisLab in English courses for students of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and Informatics as well as for academic staff for two years. Carrying the research we are comparing two groups of students - one using New Total English coursebook, coursebook CD-Rom and ActiveTeach together with MyEnglishLab component, i.e. blended learning, and the other one using New Total English coursebook, coursebook CD-Rom and ActiveTeach without MyEnglishLab, i.e. only paper-printed materials. Nowadays we are collecting and comparing the first data based on success in pre-tests, on-the-course tests and final tests. In the future we are concentrating our attention not only on students´ knowledge success, but also students´ motivation to learning in both groups.

4. Troubling English grammar issues and experience in dealing with them

4.1. Troubling English grammar issues

During many years of teaching we have monitored students of different grades and we have noticed that they face difficulties with certain grammar isuues that if they are not learnt, managed and given enough attention to at a certain moment and stage of the learning process, they become real obstacles for them, for example:

- -ing forms mistaken with progressive tenses.
- -ing form and its meanings and usage.
- Past participle and its meaning and usage.
- English sentence word order.

One would say that different English language resources pay enough attention to explaining and practising those above mentioned issues. Unfortunately, our results show that this is not enough. We found students not confident enough, they feel hopeless, frustrated and discouraged dealing with these problematic issues, and they lose motivation for further work. They choose to memorise even such issues that can easily be explained, practised and learnt through reasoning and understanding. One can say that there is nothing bad about memorising if this is the way to gain knowledge. According to our results, unfortunately adult learners and tertiary education learners including academic staff (the oldest – 84 years old) of the Faculty of Science at University of Hradec Kralove, face difficulties when they must learn by heart. This might be due to their age when their memory is not so reliable and fails more often, or due to their preference of using the left brain hemisphere preferring logical thinking.

4.2. How our brains work

If you look at the structure of the human brain, you could visibly identify two hemispheres – the left one and the right one. They are connected by a thick band of nerve fibres which connect brain cells of one hemisphere with the cells of the other hemisphere. That way they are in a continuous dialogue via this bridge. The left brain is the logical and more academic brain responsible for words, logic, analysis, numbers, lists, law and order, detail, time, linearity and sequence. While the right brain is more artistic, creative and emotional brain responsible for synthesis, colours, imagination, dimension, intuition, emotions, overview, holistic awareness, space, daydreaming. The left brain processes

information in a digital way, the right brain processes information in an analogical way. For more information see e.g. Fontana (2014), Kratochvil (1997), Lhotakova (2012), Stokes & Whiteside (1996).

For we deal with students studying computer science and English language at the same time, we decided to take the advantage of their knowledge in this field of study to create innovate study materials for them. We are sure that these materials can be successfully and effectively used in other courses as well. Considering the fact that MyEnglishLab component with ActiveTeach appears as an open application, we are using our innovative study materials within the course content, targeting students´ learning preferences.

4.3. Suggestions to teaching students with different learning preferences

At the Faculty of Science, University of Hradec Kralove, we have been looking for some other ways how to broaden possibilities how to address students with different learning preferences and help them manage troubling grammar issues.

Since adult learners and tertiary education learners face difficulties when they must learn by heart, we decided to pay special attention to logical explanations and rational understanding. Adult learners seem to prefer this way of understanding a certain language structure to a spontaneous way of learning it or memorising.

Another important aspect when learning a foreign language, opposite to the rational approach, is approach emotional. Experiencing something emotionally can, at certain scales, replace ´natural spontaneous learning´, and thanks to this emotional experience adult learner can gain the learnt issue much more easily.

Putting the two aspects – logical thinking and emotional engagement together, applied graph theory including the use of Euler graph, puzzles and games can be used to help learners gain knowledge. (Remark: Various puzzles can be found on the Internet, in recreation mathematics books and journals, e.g. Loyd (1959), Vejmola (1986). In the area of graph theory the history can also serve as a good source of practical examples and puzzles. There is a very valuable book written by Biggs, Lloyd & Wilson (1976), (Milkova, 2014).

Keeping in mind all the tools and possibilities that MyEnglishLab provides, including the possibility to attach any material prepared in advance, it gives teachers and educators an exceptional tool to make their teaching styles even more sophisticated, attractive to learners and effective.

5. Conclusion

MyEnglishLab component together with ActiveTeach give English language teachers and educators a perfect, modern and up-to-date digital tool of highest standards which represents a convenient for teachers way to make their teaching attractive to students and highly effective. From the students´ point of view they are supposed to fullfilij all expectations concerning up-to-date educational process. Thanks to possibilities that MyEnglisLab offers, English language teachers and educators can exploit it even more widely and deeply by implementing their own prepared materials within the course content. Since studies carried out with students at the Faculty of Science at University of Hradec Kralove show students´ preferences of logical and analytical thinking, other made up supporting materials using algorithms, graphs and puzzles can be implemented and used within MyEnglisLab to improve and enhance students´ engagement in learning and thus gaining knowledge.

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