



BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH TO TEACHING ESP AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract:

A new approach to language learning has arisen due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In order for classes to run smoothly, ICT has provided a new learning environment – blended learning. This paper aims to highlight the importance of blended learning in teaching ESP at tertiary level. The research was conducted on a sample of 44 students with the aim to analyse students' overall perception of blended learning. The questionnaire specifically designed for this research included opinions and attitudes of students on implementation of blended learning in language classes, namely for the purposes of ESP. Descriptive analytics was used whereas the results were analysed by applying statistical methods. Apart from considering advantages and disadvantages of applying blended learning in language learning, the paper also offers proposals concerning the improvement of teaching methods and forms. The research suggests that blended learning has positive effects on learning outcomes. Moreover, the analysis showed that this form of teaching fully satisfies students' needs.

Keywords:

Blended learning, ESP, Teaching/learning strategies, Tertiary sector.

INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 pandemic has changed a lot in education. Due to pandemic, online teaching has been proven as an indispensable tool in teaching process, especially at tertiary level where a great number of students is expected to attend classes at the university. In order to fight the virus spreading easily among student population, and thus among the citizens, certain higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia switched to online classes that proved to be a timely and useful solution. This form of learning has had a positive effect on flexibility of approach and individual and collaborative learning. Nevertheless, lack of direct contact and social interaction, as well as lowered interest and motivation were also noticeable [1].

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Improvement in epidemiological situation in the Republic of Serbia has created room for a new approach to teaching to be introduced, namely blended learning. Blended learning is defined as an integration of traditional teaching methods conducted both in the classroom and online (“e-learning”) [2] [3] [4]. This form of learning is particularly effective in groups consisting of a large number of students when it can help students better understand the segments taught in class [5] [6]. In learning English as a foreign language (EFL), blended learning is considered as an effective compensation for situations when students are not sufficiently exposed to the language [7]. In addition, integrating online and traditional learning environment has enabled teachers to provide their students with an opportunity to learn independently and, at the same time, to experience facilitated interactive learning in traditional environment [8] [9] [10].

Some of the aims of foreign language teaching include a constant effort to achieve learning outcomes, to have as many students as possible attend lectures, i.e., be exposed to the English language, and to actively participate in classes. This encouraged the introduction of a new teaching form where information and communication technologies (ICT) play a key role. ICT applied at the university level has introduced a new way of conveying and adopting knowledge [11] thus complementing traditional teaching and learning methods [12].

According to Sharpe & Benfield [13] blended learning at bachelor level has not been researched sufficiently, and the published papers focused on different teaching methods and introduced innovations. The above-mentioned research has not analysed students’ experience [13] nor outcomes achieved through blended learning [14] [15] [16].

In March 2020, Singidunum University introduced online teaching through the Microsoft Teams platform which was considered a timely solution as classes went on smoothly. At the start of the academic 2021/2022 year, the university introduced blended learning which implied combining traditional teaching methods in the classroom and online educational materials which required active participation of students. The research conducted for this paper covered the period from October 2021 till March 2022. Students who took part in the research were given an opportunity to state their perception of blended learning and to indicate advantages and disadvantages of it in the ESP context.

2. BLENDED LEARNING IN EFL CONTEXTS

Some studies indicate that there are many advantages of applying blended learning [17] in foreign language learning. In language learning, blended learning is applied in order to enable students to learn the aspects of language which are not included in traditional teaching, and which imply various interactive tasks performed in online environment regardless of time and location differences [18] [19] [20] [21]. It also provides easier access to the teaching materials and flexibility in lecture attendance. Therefore, this type of learning is rather significant for the employed students who are not always able to attend lectures in a set time. When it comes to teachers, blended learning implies more time set aside for preparing teaching materials, well-organized classes, and knowledge of IT skills. Some studies indicate that application of blended learning in EFL helps master the language better [8], improve communication skills [22] and facilitate development of sociolinguistic, intercultural, and communication competencies of the students [23].

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was developed as a result of the needs in different fields (economics, law, medicine, construction, etc.) and aims to meet the language requirements present in certain professions or specialties [24]. Unlike many other academic courses, teaching and learning English for specific purposes have had to confront various challenges, such as presenting new vocabulary to students, different situations in business environment, adopting and implementing professional vocabulary when writing a paper, and instructing students on how to translate professional texts.

Some studies researching implementation of blended learning in ESP courses have indicated that there are positive outcomes when it comes to students’ general attitudes toward language learning, gaining new experience, and autonomy in learning [21] [25]. Having in mind that this paper deals with blended learning within ESP courses at tertiary level, the following should be considered: a large number of students in a group, different levels of language knowledge, students’ motivation, and availability of teaching materials.

3. METHODOLOGY AND HYPOTHESIS

According to some earlier research, traditional learning combined with online materials creates a positive impact on learning outcomes [26] [16] [27], provides a learning environment that strengthens autonomy and



students' research skills [28] [29] [30], facilitates supervision and control of the learning process [5] [12]. Additional teaching materials provide better understanding of the knowledge acquired in the class, as well as better students' motivation, thus improving and supporting their learning process [31]. Blended learning enables students to get more involved in the learning process [32]. On the other hand, certain authors state that blended learning has had a positive effect on students' satisfaction [16] which is reflected in their relationship with the teacher, teaching materials, and other educational activities [33].

Null hypothesis: Implementation of blended learning in the context of ESP acquisition has positive effects on learning outcomes.

Hypothesis 1: Students express positive attitude towards learning ESP at the bachelor level which includes ICT.

Hypothesis 2: The implemented blended learning fully satisfies students' needs in the context of ESP acquisition.

The research designed for this paper was distributed to the students attending the courses Business English 1 (2nd year of studies) and Business English 3 (3rd year of studies) at the study programme Anglistics at Singidunum University. Blended learning model within the above-stated courses is organized in a way that students are given the option to choose to attend lectures online, through the Microsoft Teams platform, in real-time with the classes that are held at the university building, namely in the classroom. All materials are provided on the platform and students could do their assignments either in paper in the classroom or online by downloading the necessary materials from the platform.

The main objective of the courses was to improve students' knowledge of ESP and specific vocabulary related to various fields. In order for contents, both for traditional and online courses, to be successfully created, well-designed materials have to be developed so as to answer the need to present the particular vocabulary in its actual context of use. At the beginning of the class, students are introduced to the specific vocabulary by reading texts and doing appropriate exercises in order to master new terms and phrases. At this stage, reading materials are chosen so that students have the opportunity to learn the new vocabulary only from the given context, which proved to be a rather useful method in language acquisition. Then different types of exercises (filling the blanks, multiple-choice questions, matching exercises, etc) serve to check students' understanding

of the covered segments. At the end of the class unit, students are given a task in the form of a text which is to be translated into/from English. Teacher correcting the translations provides feedback on translation and assesses students' participation in discussions.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire used in the research has been partly taken from the paper Blended Course Evaluation in the Context of English for Specific Purposes: Accountability and Development by Rui Zhang and adapted to the needs and objectives of the researchers [34].

The research included 44 second - and third-year students of Anglistics study programme at Singidunum University, Belgrade. They took the blended courses Business English 1 and Business English 3 in the first semester of academic 2021/2022 taught by the researchers. Course evaluation survey data were analysed to show whether the students' learning needs have been met or not and to what extent. There were 22 items in the questionnaire which covered six dimensions of this course – materials and content (four items), learning assessment (three items), tasks and activities (three items), learner support (three items), learning mode (five items) and learning platform (four items). The items were in the form of a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 – strongly agree to 5 – strongly disagree. Generally speaking, the results show that students are satisfied with the design of these courses and their implementation.

Regarding the first set of questions, which refers to materials and content, 86.3% of students state that the materials and content of the course meet their learning needs. The students' answers are presented below in pie charts, for visual analysis.

Additionally, even greater percentage of students, around 93% of them, agree that the materials and content support the stated course objectives. Approximately the same number of students say that the materials and content are easily accessible and that online video lectures are easily understandable. Attending the course Business English 3 helped students improve their legal vocabulary and essential skills of written and spoken legal English. The course is designed in such a way for students to be able to use legal vocabulary more accurately, concisely, and effectively, as well as to translate legal texts from English into Serbian and vice versa at the end of it. On the other hand, Business English 1 course is devised to help students become familiar with the English terminology, idioms, phrases, and specific linguistic structures used in the context of leadership and management.

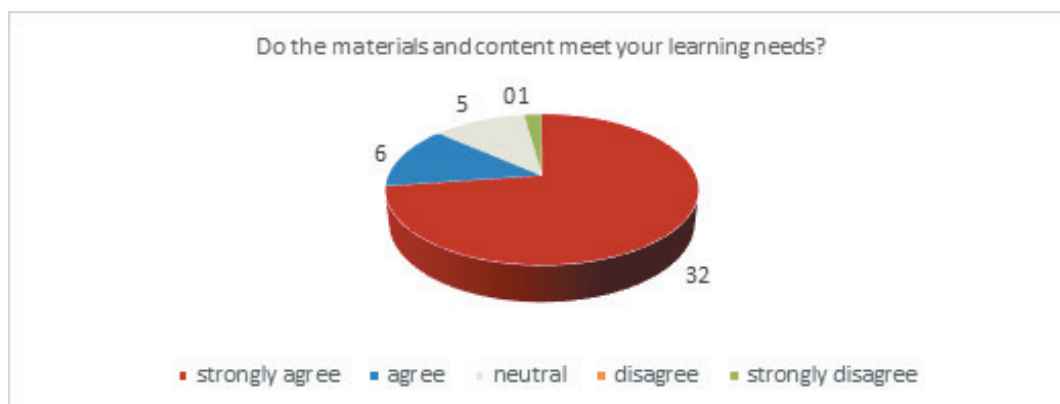


Figure 1 - Do the materials and content meet your learning needs?

The second set of questions is closely related to learning assessment. 91% of students believe the types of assessments are consistent with the course activities. In addition, a high 88.6% of students say they are provided with adequate feedback by the course instructors.

The third set of questions refers to learners' support. The findings reveal that students are mainly satisfied with the instructor-student interaction as well as content-student interaction. However, they believe the learning tasks and activities should foster more of student-student interaction. The results suggest that in the future particular attention should be paid to fostering student-student interaction in blended learning environment. It means that more effort should be put into creating disciplinary communities in the blended learning process in order to provide more interaction and collaboration between participants. The encouraging learning environment is of the utmost importance so that students can actively interact with their peers either face to face or online.

The fourth set of questions refers to the learning mode. 82% of students claim that a mixture of face-to-face and online learning (i.e., blended learning mode) makes it easy for them to follow the previously mentioned courses. The results also suggest that students have generally accepted the blended learning model. However, 11.4% of students say they have experienced difficulties since blended learning model was introduced. Further research is needed in order to identify the main challenges they face in order to help them successfully overcome all of them. It is necessary to understand how students learn best and how technology can support that for the blended learning model to be considered effective.

The instructors believe blended learning concept gives students flexibility. They can decide when and where to learn as well as manage their own time and learning process. In the long run, it could be said that this model stimulates independent learning and activates their motivation and engagement.

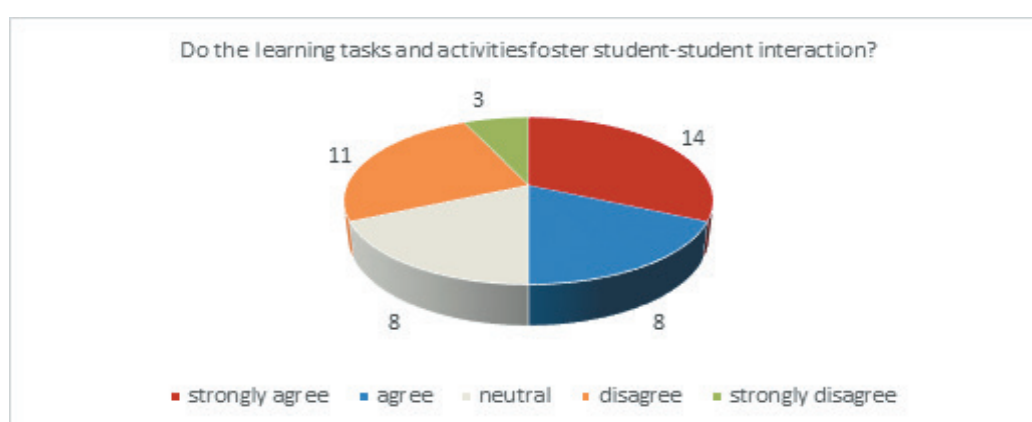


Figure 2 - Do the learning tasks and activities foster student-student interaction?

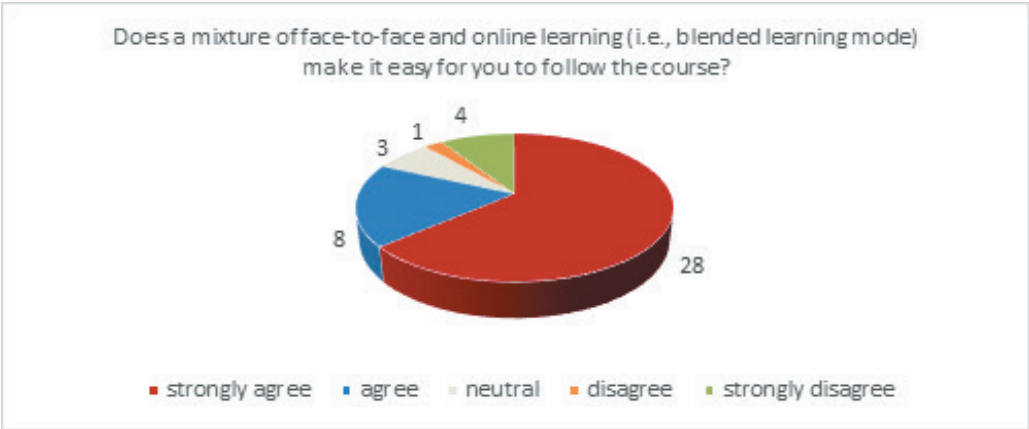


Figure 3 - Does a mixture of face-to-face and online learning (i.e., blended learning mode) make it easy for you to follow the course?

The employed students particularly appreciate the possibility to attend the lectures and have all the video materials available online, without having to disrupt their work schedules and waste their time on commuting.

The last set of questions address the learning platform, Microsoft Teams. 84.1 % of students find this platform easy to use while about 90% of them state MS Teams platform is available to use whenever and wherever they want.

The instructors agree that the platform is user-friendly and can be easily installed on any mobile device. Weak internet connection is the only negative issue which is mentioned.

5. CONCLUSION

The research conducted in this paper reveals that blended learning is perceived as beneficial and flexible for learners. The results show that students have generally accepted blended learning mode. They are satisfied with the design and implementation of the courses. The materials and content of the courses meet their learning needs. They also believe the types of assessments are consistent with the course activities. Regarding the learning platform, Microsoft Teams is considered to be user-friendly and it can be easily installed on any mobile device. The findings reveal that students are mainly satisfied with the instructor-student interaction as well as content-student interaction. However, it is implied that particular attention should be paid to encouraging student-student interaction in blended learning environment.

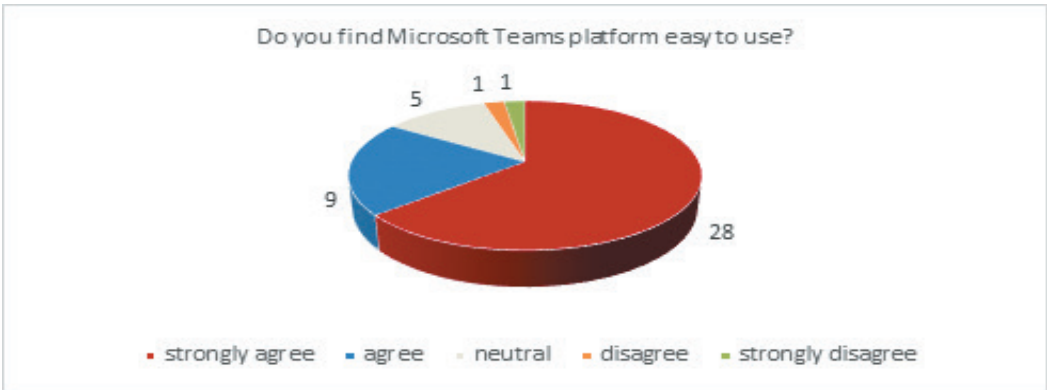


Figure 4 - Do you find Microsoft Teams platform easy to use?



Instructors should put more effort into creating a stimulating environment to motivate students to actively participate in social interaction through collaboration with their peers.

This paper considers the effectiveness of the ESP course evaluation from the perspective of students only. Therefore, further research is needed with the aim to evaluate the course from the perspective of both students and instructors.

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