THE E-LEARNING COMPONENT OF A BLENDED LEARNING COURSE

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Abstract

Using new technologies in the academic field has become more and more visible in Poland in the recent years. In the past, digital learning resources were used as supplementary materials helping to support face-to-face instruction. Nowadays, we have the opportunity not only to apply 'traditional' methods but also to use more sophisticated approaches such as e-learning and blended learning (BL) to provide more effective and flexible ways of delivering knowledge to students. E-learning can become a very effective part of 'blended learning' where a part of the course content is delivered online. This article provides a brief overview of the basic issues that need to be taken into consideration while designing a blended learning course. More precisely, it focuses on the e-learning aspect of blended learning. It also aims at providing the reader with adopted solutions and encountered problems in the process of BL course design.

Key words: Computer Assisted Language Learning, blended learning, e-learning, course design.

1. Introduction

Undeniably, teachers, course instructors as well as students have always been interested in finding new ways to learn better and faster. As Marsh (2012: 3) suggests, "[t]he most effective teaching and learning have always involved the use of different methods, approaches, and strategies to maximize knowledge acquisition and skills development". Today's students learn in ways that are different from how their parents learnt, or even from how they learnt themselves several years ago. Therefore, there is a need for introducing new methods of not only teaching but also motivating students to learn a FL. Blended learning is a relatively new method of learning, which is gaining great popularity nowadays. Properly designed materials and resources used for incorporating the e-learning component into traditional classes can bring satisfactory results using less effort at the same time.

2. Review of literature

"Technology will never replace teachers, but teachers using technology in their instruction will replace those who do not". This motto has been frequently cited by many authors, e.g. Krajka (2012), to emphasize that these days it is imperative for FL teachers and instructors to develop Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) expertise and thorough understanding of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) theory.

CALL is a vast area that has evolved dramatically in the last 50+ years, and is now a crucial component of second and foreign language learning pedagogy. Originally viewed as a supplement to classroom instruction, at present CALL is used, among others, to promote learner autonomy and encourage involvement in the target language inside and outside the FL classroom (Fotos and Browne, 2011a). Various attempts have been made to produce a decent CALL definition. A commonly cited by other authors (Fotos and Browne, 2011b; Chapelle, 2010; Gruba, 2004) definition of CALL has been proposed by Levy (1997: 1), who claims that Computer Assisted Language Learning is "(…) the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning".

It is interesting to note that the environments in which computers are used nowadays have changed significantly over the years. Stockwell and Tanaka-Ellis (2012) divide the CALL environments into the following four categories: 'face-to-face (FtF) environments', 'blended environments', 'distance environments', and 'virtual environments'. The term 'face-to-face learning' refers to so-called 'traditional' learning that takes place in the classroom with the teacher, without the use of computers. This is clearly explained by Neumeier (2005: 164) who states:

> (…) CAL can be seen as learning with the help of computers and, in contrast, we can think of FtF learning and teaching as an instructional environment that works in a classroom-based or other setting, without the help of computers.

Fleming and Hiple (2004) argue that the conservative definition of the concept 'distance learning' refers to a separation between the teacher and the learner, and the use of some means of communication between them. Dudeney and Hockly (2007) hold that, at present, distance learning comprises learning with the use of technology such as the Internet, CD-ROMs, or mobile technologies. There are also 'virtual environments' which are referred to as MOOs (Multi-User Dimension Object Oriented), MUDs (Multi-User Dimension/ Dungeon/ Dialogue) or MUVEs (Multi-User Virtual Environments) and are defined as "(…) networked environments which allow interaction between several people, and also interaction

with virtual objects" (Dudeney and Hockly, 2007: 154). However, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

The fourth learning environment described by Stockwell and Tanaka-Ellis (2012) is 'blended learning,' which is a combination of two components: face to face classroom methods and computer-mediated activities while the e-learning component has to be, to a considerable extent, a part of the whole course. Allen et al. (2007) provide a useful classification of various courses, according to which a course is considered 'blended/hybrid' if technology constitutes between 30 and 79 percent of the whole course content delivery. According to Maciaszczyk (2009), there are several names for blended learning, among them: 'hybrid learning', 'mixed learning' or 'b-learning' and they all refer to a combination of classroom teaching on the one hand, and e-learning on the other hand. Sharma and Barrett (2007: 7) suggest a relatively broad interpretation of BL:

> Blended learning refers to a language course which combines face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. The term *technology* covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and email, and a number of environments which enable teachers to enrich their courses, such as VLEs (virtual learning environments), blogs and wikis.

Blended learning can be applied to a broad range of teaching and learning situations, for example, learners meet with the teacher in a traditional, face-to-face class, but the course includes a parallel self-study component such as access to web-based materials.

Table 1. Similarities and differences between traditional learning, e-learning, and blended learning

	Traditional learning	**E-learning**	**Blended learning**
place	classroom	e-learning platform, Web 2.0 tools	classroom, e-learning platform, Web 2.0 tools
communicating with students	direct and limited by time	not limited	indirect, direct, not limited
time	limited by the timetable of classroom meetings	unlimited online meetings	limited classroom meetings and unlimited online meetings
materials and resources	traditional coursebook	e-learning resources	traditional coursebook and e-learning resources
participation in classes	face-to-face	online	face-to-face and online
feedback	direct, oral, immediate, real time	written, real time, or delayed	direct, oral, immediate, real time, written, delayed

Table 1 illustrates example similarities and differences between 'traditional', 'e-learning' and 'blended learning' courses, proposed by the present researcher. As can be seen in Table 1, the blended learning approach gives the learner a number of additional opportunities to practice and develop foreign language skills, as compared with traditional methods of learning. The e-learning platform that will be discussed in this article is *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment* (*Moodle*), which is a VLE that provides a range of online tools supporting learning and teaching. Radziszewska (2012: 65) defines a VLE as "a software application for administration, documentation, tracking, and reporting of training programmes, classroom and online events, e-learning programmes, and training content". Taking all of this into consideration, traditional and e-learning teaching methods require a different attitude towards course syllabus design, organization of classes, and a different form of communication between students and teachers.

3. To blend or not to blend? – advantages and disadvantages of a blended learning course

There are followers and opponents of blended learning courses. Nowadays, many FL teachers still appear to be reluctant to integrate technology in the FL course for some reasons. First of all, using modern technologies in some cases may appear to be too novel and complicated for an average user. Secondly, it is commonly believed that some students may have problems with planning, and fighting procrastination. It means that for some of them it is difficult to find 'appropriate' time for learning if they have too much flexibility. Another drawback is that instruction in the e-learning component of the course is dependent on technology use. However, there are solutions to the problems. For example, those teachers who are 'digital immigrants' (cf. Dudeney and Hockly, 2007) can enrol in various teacher development courses that would introduce them to the main aspects of using new technologies in the FL classroom. As regards fighting procrastination, it is imperative to provide students with effective ways of time management and, at least, basic knowledge of soft skills which are useful in everyday life.

Apart from disadvantages, there are certainly positive sides of blended learning. First of all, BL offers much greater flexibility, which means that learners participating in a b-learning course reduce their physical meeting time, space needs as well as travel and educational costs. Another advantage is that course materials are available all the time and

classes are more learner-centered than a lecture. Furthermore, various synchronous and asynchronous tools are available (e.g. chat that enables communication in real time between the teacher and the students). As Johnson (2008: 239) claims, "[s]tudents can 'talk' to each other in chat rooms, or enter into structured discussions related to academic topics – with the teacher joining in as and when they want". What is more, students have the possibility to 'take more control' of their own learning, which can lead to increasing their autonomy. Another benefit of a blended learning course is that students usually receive more feedback and the feedback is more frequent in online exercises. Last but not least, learners' expectations according to utilizing technology are met.

4. Course design

While designing a BL course, a number of important decisions should be taken into consideration to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the curriculum. Needless to say, a BL course should be based on a syllabus, which, according to Olejarczuk (2013a: 86) is "(…) the first form of communication between teachers and students". The course design process involves the following steps:

- planning the course,
- designing, preparing and developing materials,
- uploading the materials to the e-learning platform.

The first step that every teacher needs to start with is careful planning, which is related to integrating the e-learning component into 'traditional' FL learning. At this point, one needs to consider such issues as:

- Why do I actually want my students to participate in a course like this?
- What is the main objective of introducing such a course?
- How will I check my students' achievement?
- Which students should participate in the course? (year, semester of studying a FL, proficiency level, number of students in a group)?
- What kind of course (technical, grammar, Business English) do I want to use?
- What experience (if any) do my students have with technology use?
- What experience (if any) do I have with technology use?
- How are the students going to access the e-learning resources? Are they going to use any special login or password?
- Do my students really need a BL approach?

As can be seen from the above, there are a number of issues that need to be considered before approaching the second step, which is designing the blended learning elements as well as preparing and developing materials that are going to be used in the course. The second step is the most tedious and time-consuming. First of all, it is crucial to consider the relationship between traditional (classroom) learning, and e-learning parts (e.g. Which component should be predominant? To what extent?). Secondly, we should remember that different students have various learning style preferences. Therefore, we should try to vary the course in terms of using different types of materials used so that all the students can be successful. After that, we should prepare and develop the abovementioned materials, which can appear in the form of printable documents, interactive exercises, links to online resources, web pages or video films. The last step of the course design process is the uploading of the materials to the e-learning platform, which takes a lot of time and patience. After uploading the materials, but before introducing the students to the course, clear rules have to be set concerning participation in blended learning classes. What is more, the students should be familiarized with the organization of the course and informed what they are expected to do at each step of the course. They should also be provided with a course syllabus and the outline of the course in a digital form or a printable file. In addition to this, the teacher should set up a simple system of communication with the students to ensure that the course participants can easily ask questions or inform about any unexpected problems that may arise.

5. 'Perfecting Soft Skills' course (*PerfectSS*)

In the Centre of Languages and Communication (CLC) of Poznan University of Technology (PUT), a team of FL teachers developed a number of e-learning courses using the *Moodle* platform for the purpose of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to students. As a consequence, the CLC holds a wide range of courses tailored to the needs of individual learners. Due to the fact that nowadays students need to develop 'soft skills' in order to improve their career prospects, the present researcher created the *PerfectSS* e-learning course available at *http://fomalhaut.clc.put.poznan.pl/moodle22/*. The course was created within the European Union project 'Era Inżyniera' in 2012. The process of developing the course parts was based on the present researcher's more than 6-year experience in designing e-learning courses for Business English, specialized language, and soft skills.

Table 2. A syllabus for the e-learning component of the BL course.

	Topic
Online class 1	A definition of soft skills
Online class 2	Soft skills vs. hard skills
Online class 3	Negotiations
Online class 4	Presentations
Online class 5	Assertiveness
Online class 6	Body language
Online class 7	Stress management
Online class 8	Effective time management
Online class 9	Motivation at work
Online class 10	Business correspondence

The *PerfectSS* e-learning course was combined with traditional classes, forming a BL course. During online classes (30% of the whole course), the students learnt and practiced the 'soft skills' component of the course. The remaining classes (70%) were conducted in the classroom with the regular teacher. During classroom learning the participants learnt specialized language (ESP) connected with their field of study. Table 2 presents the syllabus for the 'soft skills' component of the course which included ten units. Every part of the e-course concentrated on fundamental aspects of 'soft skills,' including lists of vocabulary connected with each topic, reading comprehension texts, dictionaries, online resources, online grammar practice and short films as core components. Numerous exercises offered the students the opportunity to do hands-on exercises which included gap-filling, True/False questions, or matching.

Another interesting type of exercise was a 'task online', in which the learners wrote a short description (selected topics were related to 'soft skills') and submitted it to the teacher. After completing the task, the document could be downloaded or printed, and assessed online or on paper. In order to enable the students to record their speaking tasks online, a 'nanogong' applet was installed. This application was used to record, playback, save, and download the students' utterances on the computer. When the recording was played back, each participant could speed up or slow down the sound without changing it.

Some units in the e-learning course also contained links to online dictionaries, editable dictionaries, and crosswords, which encouraged reflection. The online dictionaries used on the *Moodle* platform, e.g. *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, allowed the participants to check the meaning of any new word online. The editable dictionaries enabled the students to prepare a list of 'soft skills' words, which they could then share, download, or print. The learners were offered the possibility of talking to one another in English using a chat, which was available

on the platform. All in all, the learners could develop their 'soft skills' and use the English language in numerous ways by means of interactive exercises and additional resources.

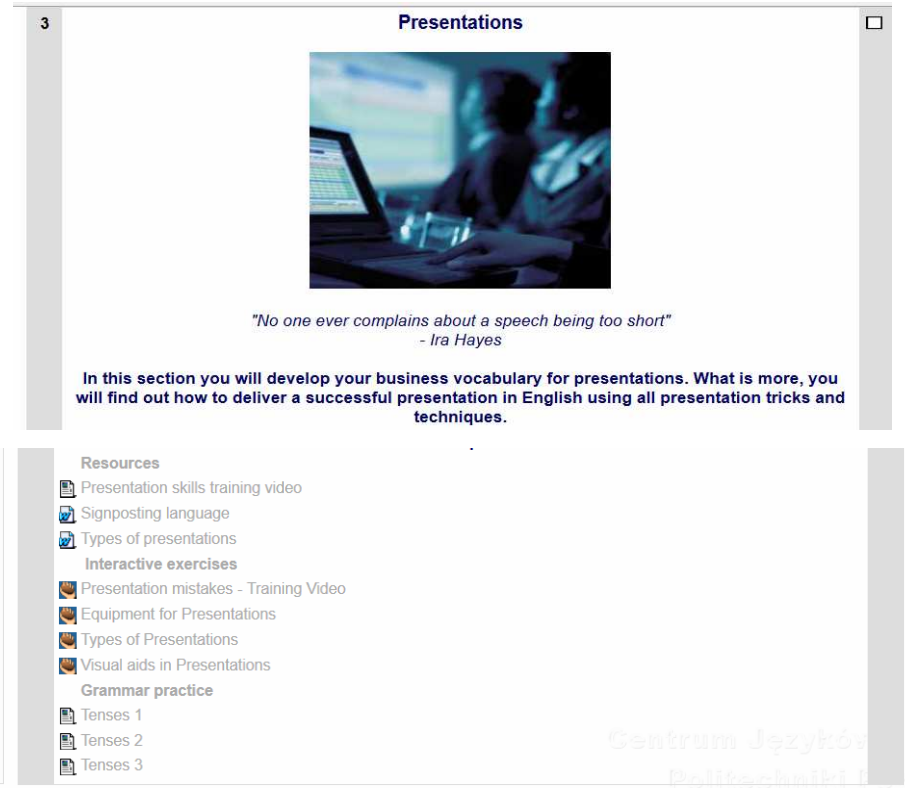

Figure 1. A sample unit in the online course.

As presented in Figure 1, a sample unit for 'soft skills' in the *PerfectSS* course was composed of three sections. In the first part, the students were provided with downloadable resources aimed at introducing them to the course. In the second section, the learners were supposed to complete interactive exercises or watch a short film connected with the topic of the current unit. Finally, the participants could learn or revise grammatical structures online.

The subjects were provided with feedback shortly after completing each exercise. The learners could score max. 100% for each task. The number of attempts to do a particular task was unlimited and the computer calculated the average of all scores for a particular task. It is worth noting that the *Moodle* platform facilitated monitoring the students' work through automatic log reports that contained information concerning the type of work completed and the amount of time spent on each task by each participant. What is more, the system allowed the instructor to specify timeframes for completing particular activities. The learners were supposed to complete each unit on one particular day indicated by the present researcher. Due to the fact that the students had different timetables (e.g. English classes were on Monday and

Friday in the case of Electronics and Telecommunications students whereas students of Information Technology had English classes on Monday and Wednesday) and in order to provide greater clarity, *Moodle* was always available on Monday from 8 a.m. and closed on Tuesday at 8 a.m.). Thanks to this, all the students could complete the tasks at any time and any place. In case there were questions or problems, the course instructor was available online at particular time, e.g. Monday from 6 to 7.30 p.m. The participants were informed about the procedure that was going to be taken on the first class and they were given a password which was necessary to sign in to the e-learning course. Due to the fact that none of the students had had BL classes before, at the beginning of the semester some of the participants were anxious or even afraid of this new form of learning. Also, they needed to improve their self-discipline and learn organizational skills. Nevertheless, at the end of the BL course most of the participants stated that they were willing to participate in a BL course in the next semester.

6. Conclusion

Designing a blended learning course requires a lot of time, energy and knowledge of online tools. Although it may bring some problems, it creates a number of new possibilities. As Neumeier (2005: 169) aptly points it out, "(…) the CALL components demand a high degree of learner autonomy (self-discipline and organizational skills) and motivation (…)". However, taking into consideration all the advantages and drawbacks of BL, the former seem to outweigh the latter, especially in the light of a growing body of recent research which showed that students had positive attitudes to this combination of 'face-to-face' and 'online' teaching approach (Olejarczuk, 2013b; Warschauer, 1996; Akbulut, 2008) and that blended learning contributes to FL proficiency development (Naba'h et al., 2009; Djiwandono, 2013).

All in all, it can be argued that, if applied successfully, BL could enable learners to study at their own pace as well as where and when it suits them. What is more, students can have a possibility to 'take responsibility' for their own learning. Nevertheless, probably the greatest advantage of blended learning is that it aims to place the individual learner at the centre of the teaching and learning experience.

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