INTRODUCTION OF BLENDED LEARNING TO UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES: BENEFITS AND OBSTACLES

Elena Rumyantseva
Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University

Abstract
This article proves a necessity of embedding blended learning practice in Master's Degree curricula as an essential ingredient of Ukrainian higher education (HE). Blended learning is an innovative approach to education that embraces the advantages of both traditional face-to-face methods and ICT supported learning, including online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online. The data collection tool includes a research-made questionnaire of EAP/ESAP Master's degree students' needs. Our results based on data analysis showed that there was certain correlation between students' learning style preferences and their full-/part-time employment. The analysis provided a reasonable foundation for EAP/ESAP teachers to design a Syllabus with flexible approach and mixed activities that would satisfy the learning needs of Master's degree students.

Key words: Blended learning, Ukrainian HE, Master's degree curricula, Master's students' needs

INTRODUCTION

The Ukrainian Ministry of Education had identified the improvement in levels of English in Ukraine's universities as a priority. At the same time, the most needed 21-st century skills, i.e. abilities that students need to develop in order to succeed professionally in the information age, are critical and creative thinking on one hand and ICT (Information Communication Technology) skills on the other hand. University graduates with both of these skills are in great demand by employers in many sectors. Within this context blended learning is a well-suited instrument to perform the above tasks.

Blended learning is swiftly developing in academic sphere in European Universities. Furthermore, it is one of contemporary trends of higher education. The implementation of e-learning in foreign language teaching is often carried out more slowly than e-learning used in technical or science subjects in Universities. At the same time in this 21-st century active, successful global society participants must be able to develop their proficiency in communication with the tools of technology.

We define blended learning as an appropriate mix of face-to-face and online learning activities, using traditional instructions plus guided support on one hand and independent learning, supported by the use of digital technologies and designed

Syllabi based on strong pedagogical principles to encourage learner's engagement, flexibility and success on the other hand.

The language skills of the students can be developed naturally as in-home-type activity through structured e-lessons that allow progressive and flexible learning at the pace of the students, taking in consideration the divergence of their levels. A1/A2-level students can proceed on learning grammar rules, lexical and phonetic concepts through practice, while B1/B2-level students can perfect their skills in Academic Writing.

Blended learning in EAP and ESAP is an up-to-date education strategy spread all over European universities where learners learn partly through traditional classroom methods and partly through online (e-learning via digital technologies). We suggest that introduction of blending to Ukrainian Universities will benefit both graduates and teachers. There is a great deal of evidence that students learn substantially more from active inquiry-based activities and problem solving than from listening to lectures [1]. It was indicated that blended learning accessibility and flexibility are preferred by students which help them on studying and planning their own learning. Furthermore, participants got more response in learning the content and believed that they learnt more on this method of studying [2].

METHODS

The current study examined the existing experience of European universities in Blended Learning implementation.

In the second stage, the survey of Mater's students' needs analysis was carried out in three groups of Applied Mathematics, Pure Mathematics and Pedagogy specialisms.

The aims of the study were to make a comparative analysis to elicit the similar problems and obstacles to Blended Learning implementation both in European and Ukrainian higher institutions.

RESULTS

It was observed that blended learning is getting increasing attention and studied in different aspects. The most compelling arguments received from the studies on blended learning can be resumed as follows:

- Combining face-to-face instruction with an online delivery mode is associated with improved pedagogy and easier access to information [2].
- Can facilitate independent and collaborative learning experiences and provides better learning outcomes [3].
- Blended learning builds both a community of and a platform for free and interactive dialogue [4].
- University students favour blended learning [6].
- Being digitally literate enhances the chances of students extending their lessons and conversations beyond the classroom [5].

The results of survey aimed at the investigation of the needs of Master's students within the framework of their EAP/ESAP course showed:

- Approximately 75 per cent of Master's students are fully or partially employed and unable to attend EAP/ESAP course regularly.
- Thereupon they use quite a number of on-line resources and educational web-sites to meet EAP/ESAP challenge and gain the learner's objectives.
- Presently Mater's students express their willingness to receive and perform tasks as well as submit different types of EAP/ESAP papers in e-format.
- Mater report about their readiness to enrol in EAP/ESAP course arranged on the basis of blended learning.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that a substantial impact and a switch from passive learning to active learning could be achieved if blended learning was introduced in EAP/ESAP curricula in Ukrainian Universities.

The results indicate the substantial advantages of blended learning for both learners and teachers:

- E-format collaboration: E-learning allows more effective interaction between the learners and their teachers through the use of e-mail, Viber, Skype, etc., so teacher can provide supplementary support to learners outside of class time.
- Student autonomy: The use of eLearning materials increases a learner's ability to set appropriate learning goals and take charge of his or her own learning, developing skills.
- Flexible Time Management: Working online, with access to unlimited up-to-date resources, gives learners and teachers greater time, flexibility, freedom and convenience to manage their learning/teaching in a way that meets their individual needs.
- Team working: Blended learning encourages both individual and collaborative activity, it facilitates the active engagement giving students the opportunity to test their ideas, synthesize the ideas with a team, to discuss the aims and results with a group.
- Critical-thinking and creative skills development: Blended learning helps teach these skills by encouraging learners to work, share and collaborate on-line thereby preparing them for the modern workplace.

However, some obstacles can be predicted on the way of Blended learning implementation:

- Technical challenge: Digital Technology literacy, i.e. necessity in training for both academic staff and students (educational platforms: Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, Learning Management Systems Comparison Google Docs) [7-11];
- Couse material, Syllabi, Curricula redesign to meet the Master's students' needs.
- Assessment criteria for Blended learning activities.

REFERENCES
1.   Beichner. R.L. & Saul, J.M. (2005). Introduction to SCALE-UP (Student-Centered Activities for Large Enrollment-Undergraduate Programs) Project. In Invention and impact: Building excellence in undergraduate science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education, 61-66. Washington. DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science.
2.   Bonk, C.J., Olson, T.M., Wisher, R.A., & Orvis, K.L. (2002). Learning from focus groups: An examination of blended learning. Journal of Distance Education, 17(3), 97-118.

3.   Garrison, D. R., & Vaughan, N. D. (2008). Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines (1st Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

4.   Graham, C. R. (2006). Blended learning systems: Definitions, current trends and future directions. In C. J. Bonk, & C. R. Graham (Eds.), The Handbook of blended learning: Global perspectives, local designs (pp. 3-21).San Francisco: Pfeiffer.

5.   Kasraie, N., & Alahmad, A. (2014). Investigating the reasons institutions of higher education in the USA and Canada utilize blended learning. Mevlana International Journal of Education (MIJE) Vol. 4(1), pp. 67-81, http://mije.mevlana.edu.tr/http://dx.doi.org/10.13054/mije.13.68.4.1

6.   Paechter, M. & Maier, B. (2010). Online or face-to-face? Students' experiences and preferences in e-learning. Internet and Higher Education. 13, 292–297

Online resources

7.   Learning Management Systems Comparison: https://elearningindustry.com/learning-management-systems-comparison-checklist-of-features

8.   Canvas: https://www.canvaslms.eu/

9.   Google Docs: https://www.googleclassroom.com

10.   Blackboard: http://uki.blackboard.com/

11.   Moodle: https://moodle.com/?gclid