

Blended Learning in English Language Teaching: Course Design and Implementation.

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Abstract: Traditional educational system is slowly adapted to fast technological changes in the contemporary information-oriented society. So, constant refreshment and improvement the content and methods of teaching are needed to prepare unaccomplished who will be capable to take responsibilities in decision making, capable to apply critical thinking and creative approaches to their work. These all imply to be strongly committed to self-development and lifelong learning.

In spite of understanding the language importance, Uzbekistan has problems with language competence that is expressed in low ability of young specialists to be involved into international projects and research. This problem can be explained by some inconsistencies of existing language education system in Uzbekistan. First, it is the lack of continuity in language teaching of universities; second, it is the lower mobility of Uzbekistan in comparison with Europe; and third, it is decreasing number of learning hours for language tuition.

To minimize these inconsistencies that back up the development, the language education system needs to be intensified by means of strengthening self-learning of students. The article addresses the practices of teachers in applying the method of blended learning in teaching English to nonlinguistic students. The experiment implies using the MOODLE platform that allows to download different-purposed materials including animation and authentic texts for listening and reading and to organize an individual learning trajectory of students monitored constantly by tutors.

Keywords: Blended learning, Moodle platform, Virtual Learning Environment, E-learning, Online course.

Introduction

Teaching foreign languages for professional purposes is considered to be the priority in updating education in Uzbekistan. The ability to communicate in other languages is becoming an integral part of professional competence of any specialist, no difference what field he/she works in. With changing requirements to specialist training there is a need to overhaul the content and approaches to teaching foreign languages to nonlinguistic students. In the frame of the limited class hours new methodological teaching approaches should be based on individualization or autonomy that will serve the purpose of recognizing commitment to lifelong learning. The popular motto of higher education nowadays is “to learn how to learn”. No university can graduate a specialist prepared to independent professional career; people become specialists in the process of their personal professional development. So, in this way, autonomy can be considered as a necessary condition, in which a

student uses endless potential of a human brain and modern technologies, including information ones, to attain knowledge faster, with higher efficiency and less effort.

Blended learning is an approach to education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods. This type of learning represents a current trend in the education field, that is, to complement face-to face (FTF) classes with web-based materials, which is known as “blended learning”. Blended learning is normally defined as the integration of traditional classroom methods with online activities (termed “e-learning”). Blended learning courses are becoming increasingly significant, with ICTs being developed to complement, not replace, traditional forms of learning. Blended learning is not simply integrating ICTs with the FTF approach. Actually, blended learning represents a fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic, incorporating various learning elements such as online and traditional classroom environments, media for learning content delivery, synchronous and asynchronous interactions, different kinds of resources, and group and individual learning activities. In higher education, a growing number of universities offer blended learning courses for students, in order to join the best features of both class teaching and online learning to promote active, self-directed learning opportunities for pupils with added flexibility. Bleed argued that blended learning should be viewed as an opportunity to redesign the way that courses are developed, scheduled, and delivered in higher education through a combination of physical and virtual instruction. There is evidence that blended learning has a number of potential benefits compared to traditional or fully on-line courses, such as:

- providing students with more control over learning and helping pupils foster creative and critical thinking;
- improving students’ learning achievements; enhancing pupils’ learning satisfaction and
- reducing stress level;
- producing a stronger sense of community among students.

Implementing «Blended learning» in the ESL classes on moodle platform:

Learning foreign languages constitutes an invaluable part of an educational curriculum at Urgench State University (URSU). Even so, we can not boast of a huge number of contact hours because in spite of the understanding of the language importance it is not in priority for a technical institution.

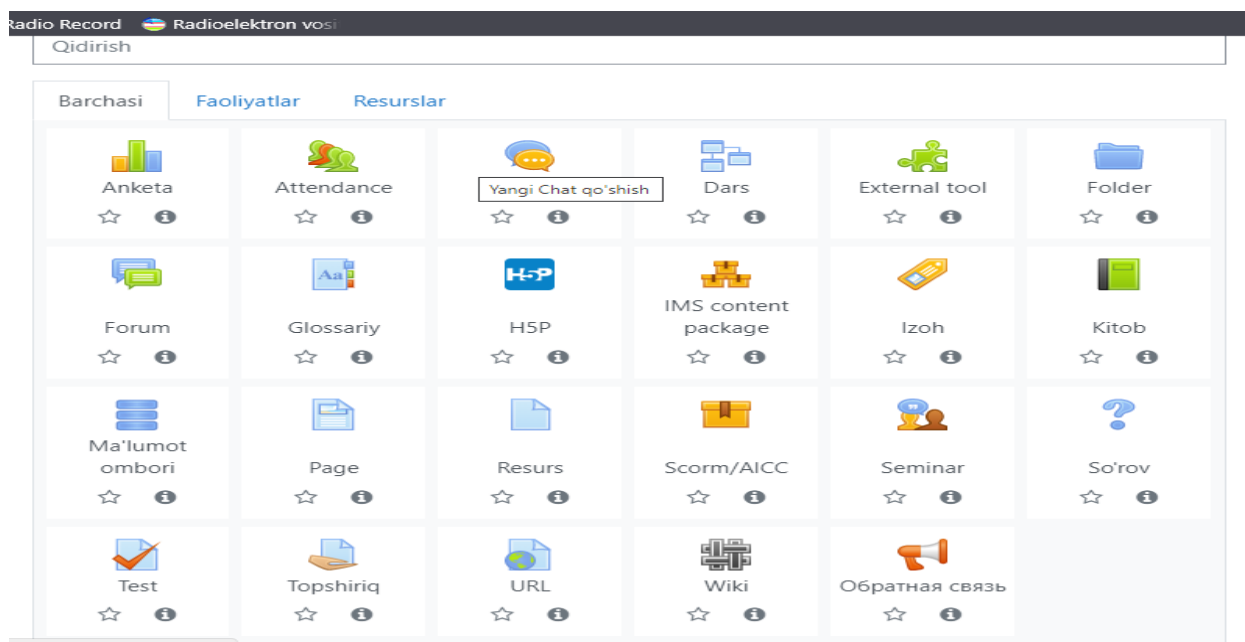
Teachers do much for intensification the learning process in the condition of limited hours and in their attempt they address resources that are able to accumulate much information, be flexible in choice and mobile for constant upgrading. In other words, they appeal to resource able to organize the ground for students’ self-working.

Consider one of such resources in use, look at Moodle. This refers to a Virtual Learning Environment and is one of the most effective learning tools. Moodle supports a learning model where a tutor acts as a course moderator. The platform

provides an individual approach to each student by creating a virtual environment for group collaboration.

For instance, at URSU we developed an English grammar module integrated into a General English course. This course was created for constant mastering of grammatical skills. In a theoretical part of the course the rules are given in attempt to explain the essence of one or another grammatical phenomenon, and show its place in the language system. Students learn to analyze grammatical structures, define regularities and become aware of exceptions. This part of the course provides student's autonomy in learning and revising any material missed and badly acquired during guided lessons. A practical part of the course is devoted to working through and polishing grammar material of the theoretical part.

As any other teaching tool Moodle has some advantages and disadvantages. One of the biggest advantages is delivery, rather than a collection of disparate online tools. Everything is in one place, learners' work, grades and contributions can be easily monitored. Being in one place it is also easier to build a sense of online community among learners than by email.



Moodle element
Application in language teaching
Assignment:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online activity • offline activity • uploading a file
Can be used for translation, text reference, gap-filling and transformation exercises, writing essays and letters, etc. There is a possibility to attach

an audio or video file for listening comprehension tasks.
Journal - Offers the same forms of work as “Assignment” but provides students with the opportunity to return to a text of an assignment many times to correct it in compliance with tutor’s comments.
Survey - Represents questions with variants of answers; allows getting statistics of answers in percentage and in a form of a diagram.
Glossary - Gives opportunity to create a glossary of lexical units, terms, quotations, etc. both for students and tutors; automatically links words and expressions of the course with their definitions in glossary.
Lesson/lecture - Intended for step-by-step study of a topic: each correct answer opens a new page with a new assignment or information. Incorrect answer returns students to description of the topic. This element can be used for presentation of cultural information, teaching grammar, reading, listening, etc.
Wiki- Can be used for creating collaborative group projects where all participants have rights to edit a text.
Forum- Intended for information exchange between all course participants. This element can be used for group discussions and communication with a tutor.
Test - Allows creating a question bank used for continuous and final assessment; contains different types of questions.
Resource:
• text page
• web page
• directory
• link to a file or web site
-Intended for placing different information: text, graphics, audio and video files, source lists, and useful links directory. Unlike all previous elements Resource doesn’t involve interaction and assessment.

The Moodle platform also enables flexible organization of the educational process. The platform gives an opportunity to focus on more complex sections of the course leaving simple pieces for self-study. Automation of the learning process can extremely facilitate teachers’ work. All the results are checked and stored in the gradebook. Multimedia effects are the next appealing component of Moodle courses. Besides the traditional textual and graphical information e-learning involves multimedia tools: animation, video, audio and color. This provides visualization of the teaching material and allows using most mechanisms of perception the new information by humans. However, Moodle environment has certain disadvantages. Computer-aided learning will never replace direct teacher-student interaction; pure e-learning is impersonal. Providing extensive automation of education, e-learning

cannot take into account individual characteristics of students' intelligence and temper. This does not mean that the new technology should be rejected.

Tutor's Role

It may seem surprising but a tutor's role in blended learning is very important. Indeed, teaching workload increases, professional requirements rise and management control functions become more complicated. Using a blended learning method in teaching foreign languages induces tutors to constantly increase professional expertise, master computer skills, create new online courses, and contribute much time to lesson preparation. Yet, in 1978, McKeachie identified six teaching roles, all of which can be applied to online teaching:

- A facilitator who enhances student learning by encouraging active participation in discussion and by helping the student to see education as meaningful and relevant

- . - An expert who communicates expertise through lectures and discussions, and is able to stimulate students without overwhelming them.

- A formal authority that helps students by establishing boundaries such as acceptable conduct and dates of submission of materials.

- A socializing agent who has contacts within the larger academic community, and as such can be helpful to students in providing such things as letters of recommendation and links to research and publication sources

- . - An ego ideal that is charismatic and shows commitment and enthusiasm not only to the subject matter but also to the students themselves.

- A person who demonstrates compassion and understanding of student needs .

Online tutors usually create their own courses and strive to make the courses engaging and effective, encouraging interaction, fostering reflection and self-improvement. E.S. Polat and M.V. Moiseeva, Russian researchers, prove that an online course should include the following didactic blocks:

- organizational and methodical;

- informative and training;

- identifying and controlling .

The first block includes information about goals and objectives of the course and explains how it links to other courses of the program. The informative and training block should consist of modules of theoretical material and practical tasks. The monitoring functions can be implemented in different ways: tests, webinars, online discussions, etc.

The first task of the tutor, willing to integrate blended learning into the process of teaching a foreign language, is to arrange learning material properly. In order to do this it is necessary to know in advance which material should be used in the class and which can be posted online. It means it is very important for teacher to understand which material should be explained and worked over in class and which is more appropriate for self-study.

Another significant factor for a tutor for successful integration of blended learning is a well-structured and thoroughly planned syllabus. A tutor should keep in the mind the following aspects: combination of online and classroom activities,

adequacy of teaching goals regarding to students' individual abilities, proper choice of teaching methods, monitoring and self-assessment tools.

When creating a course on the Moodle platform a tutor should also take into account that online courses should meet certain criteria such as:

- complete coverage of the subject area;
- unity of terminology;
- didactic consistency in selection of examples and assignments;
- methodically correct sequence of examples and assignments;
- interactivity of the learning tasks;
- freedom of choice of learning pathways.

The tutor guides students as they move through a huge amount of information, helps analyze and synthesize the course material, organizes collaboration and interaction of the participants of the learning process. T. Bender in her book characterizes such tutor's style as being supportive and encouraging, giving ample feedback, being a good role model, being appropriately informal, and eliciting discussion .

Advantages of the blended method

The blended course instruction both offers more choices for content delivery and may be more effective than courses that are either fully online or fully classroom-based. Because not all students learn in the same way, suggests that presenting materials in a variety of formats helps maximize student engagement. "The community college instructor should try to offer learning activities that will appeal to the widest variety of learning styles possible", reflects Stewart. Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee also suggested that students learn more in blended courses than they do in comparable traditional class sections. Teachers responsible for the blended sections reported that students wrote better papers, performed better on exams, produced higher quality projects, and were capable of more meaningful discussions on course material .Chris Dede of the Harvard University's Graduate School of Education noted that many people are able to find their voice in distance media in a way that they cannot in a typical classroom. A shy student who might not participate in a classroom environment may speak up in an online forum where students have more time to think before they are required to comment. Faculty teaching in a blended delivery model report an increased level of interaction, both among fellow classmates and with their instructor, which suggests that the blended environment offers a less-intimidating forum for student participation, specifically accommodating students who tend to be less verbal. Moreover, the increased interaction results in a more inclusive environment, leading all students to experience a richer and more diverse learning experience. While some instructors may still argue that a traditional classroom is the "richest" teaching medium, blended instruction allows ample opportunities for building social relationships between the teacher and students. "Blended courses offer the convenience and flexibility of wholly online courses without the loss of faculty or student interaction". Combining the successful elements of a well-designed online course with the face-to-face discussions and personal interactions a blended course offers maximizes student participation because the preferred learning styles of more

students are being met, including those that favor the flexibility of asynchronous learning and those that prefer a “live”, interactive discussion. A number of potential advantages to blended learning are emerging. Some of these revolve around accessibility, pedagogical effectiveness, and course interaction. Many of today’s college students are non-traditional, attempting to balance family, jobs and university life. Coming to campus is often difficult for many of them and reducing the number of required face-to-face hours can help students manage. Teachers should be cognizant of the issues, such as dependent families and work schedules, that non-traditional students often bring to the classroom. He notes that upon returning to school students often faced “formidable challenges”. One advantage to a course utilizing blended instruction is the ability for the adult learner with multiple responsibilities to more easily accommodate not only their school responsibilities but also family and work life. Miller and Lu maintain that the ‘anytime, anywhere’ mentality of online course delivery “makes sense to working adults who need flexibility” either completing degrees or upgrading skills for job advancement. They also note that the availability of e-courses provide the needed flexibility to maintain part-time jobs, especially students from lower socio-economic classes. Blended course delivery offers the flexibility of having part of the coursework available in an e-learning format resulting in greater flexibility for those students who are juggling multiple responsibilities outside of school. Students have also responded favorably to the ability to minimize both the commuting time and travel costs associated with fully face-to-face course delivery. Blended learning methodologies accommodate the student’s active life schedule while still providing the social connections that are necessary for clear communication to exist, ultimately supporting retention and success.

Disadvantages

Some adult learners may have questionable technical skills and as many of adults experience some computer-related phobia. Unpleasant side effects associated with technology may include strong, negative emotional states that arise not only during the interaction but even before, when the idea of having to interact with the computer begins. Frustration, confusion, anger, anxiety and similar emotional states which may be associated with the interaction can adversely affect productivity, learning, social relationships and overall well-being. It is imperative that adult learners have access to the support necessary to successfully engage in the online portion of blended course delivery. This delivery mode provides a unique opportunity to introduce students to online instruction methods while still maintaining a traditional classroom presence. Participating in a blended or hybrid course requires students to be self-motivated learners with effective time management skills, much like participation in a fully online course. Students are held responsible for not only the online aspect of the class but also for fully interacting in the classroom meetings. This combination of pedagogical methods seeks to encourage an active, engaged learning environment where students potentially learn more than in a traditional on-campus classroom. However, a change from a lecture-oriented class to student-centered active learning can constitute a radical change for some students, especially older students unaccustomed to taking responsibility for their own learning. If

students enrolled in a hybrid or blended classes are expecting a traditional class setting, they may be disappointed and/or discouraged by the format. Hybrid courses train students, even those technologically wary, in computer and communication skills that will prove to be valuable in the workplace. Students may enhance their computer skills while engaging in an introduction to online learning and find that they desire to take additional fully online courses or that blended course delivery more adequately satisfies their need for flexibility and interpersonal relationships. Faculty resistant to online course delivery can often see the benefits of blended course delivery; however moving a traditional course to a blended format requires careful consideration of educational objectives and methodologies. Garnham and Kaleta noted that in order to teach a successful hybrid course, the instructor must invest a significant amount of time and effort into the redesign of the class. Course redesign will require a review of instructional strategies and assessment techniques as well as the limitations presented by the existing course management system. Care should be taken to select activities whose objectives can be met via online delivery and those which will be enhanced in a traditional format. The focus is on faculty facilitating instruction and students becoming active and interactive learners. Blended learning provides a unique opportunity to bridge generations, providing the face-to-face contact requested by Baby Boomers, the independence preferred by Gen-Xers, and the interaction and sense of community desired by Net Geners. Instructors who implement such strategies have potential to create engaging and supportive learning settings, drawing upon the maximum benefit from technology while retaining the best features of face-to face teaching. [11]Learners must have basic technology knowledge or a willingness to learn. In virtually all blended learning environments you will encounter at least one learner who is hesitant about change. There are also those who may not be familiar with technology and have a steep learning curve ahead of them. To alleviate this issue, you should have support on hand to teach new learners and motivate those who may be more reluctant. It's also important to cultivate a blended learning community that stresses the value of technology in training, as well as the real world benefits it can offer. Set up workshops that employees can attend in order to learn as much as possible about the new training program, and be introduced to the features of the devices they'll be using on a regular basis. [12]High technology set up and maintenance costs. Purchasing the learning technology for your blended learning program, such as devices and infrastructure setup, can be costly. This is especially true if you have a larger workforce or several departments. However, bear in mind that these are just short term expenses, and that you are most likely saving money in the long run. Even if you have to pay a nominal monthly maintenance fee, you are still receiving the many benefits that a blended learning strategy has to offer.[13] Using e-learning platforms can be more time consuming than traditional methods and can also come with new costs as e-learning platforms and service providers may charge user fees to educators. Another critical issue is access to network infrastructure. Although the digital divide is narrowing as the Internet becomes more pervasive, many students do not have pervasive and ubiquitous access to the Internet – even in their classrooms. Any attempt to incorporate blended learning strategies into an organization's pedagogical strategy

needs to account for this. This is why learning centers are built with good wi-fi connections to make sure this issue is addressed.

Conclusion :

Computer-mediated learning is becoming increasingly popular in teaching foreign languages. Modern students often expect online component or support as part of their course. Therefore many institutions offer online learning options to supplement face-to-face classes. Current research suggests that the best results come from a blended learning method. Blended learning can be very timesaving and provides convenience and flexibility of learning. It has a tremendous potential in teaching foreign languages as it offers an opportunity to integrate innovative and technological advances of online learning with interaction and participation of the best traditional practices.

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