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SOME ASPECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING WITH VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (MOODLE)

Nowadays the number of methods in teaching English varies and the ways that they are being used all over the world have become crucially important to language practice. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are currently being globally used, as they present online spaces where teachers can organize their work, and the work of their students. With changing requirements to specialist training in Ukraine it is necessary to change approaches to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching. New technologies should be based on individualization or autonomy that will serve the purpose of lifelong learning. The system of foreign language teaching needs to be stimulated by means of strengthening self-study of students that should be organized and methodically supported by teachers. Both online interactive teaching and traditional class-learning technologies can improve the effectiveness of teaching ESP. This process is called blended learning. Language education is an area where open-access resources, online courses, virtual classrooms and social networks based on information and communication technology (ICT) are being increasingly used to give learners access to information, promote interaction and communication, and enhance digital literacy skills. VLE is an online (web) environment, where various tools are provided for the teacher and the student to facilitate the learning experience. VLEs generally operate across the World Wide Web, so a student needs an Internet connection to access a VLE, although access will be restricted to registered students by a teacher. The use of VLEs to support teaching and learning just like in what face-to-

face teaching can offer in order to foster learning Information delivery, peer support, group work, self-assessment, teacher–student communication, tutorials etc. A VLE provides a range of tools to facilitate the same teaching and learning principles, but they are delivered online in a ‘virtual’ environment. Thus, using computer technology does not involve a whole new approach to teaching it utilizes the same methods but applied in a different way. However, this means that the same thought and consideration must also be applied to online teaching as you would do with face-to-face teaching. In addition to supplementing traditional face-to-face teaching methods, there are a number of challenges in language teaching which VLEs can help with: increased student numbers; increasing assessment marking; widening participation, limited teaching resources. Innovative teaching approaches coupled with VLI such as Moodle, Canvas, Blackboard or virtual classrooms have become ubiquitous elements of teaching English. Moodle is one of the most popular VLEs in teaching English.

The present study sees the challenge of effective and optimal integration of Moodle-based blended learning into the English for Specific Purposes teaching process as a research problem. As a result, the present study aims at analyzing the term ”blended learning” as well as the potential of the use of Moodle platform in the combination of online interactive teaching with traditional class-learning methods that can improve the effectiveness of teaching ESP.

It is difficult to find a widely accepted definition of blended learning, and even more difficult to find a core set of literature on blended learning methodologies. Such training approaches run from traditional, face-to-face class meetings to totally online courses that have no direct interpersonal contact. For example, Hanson, K.S., and Clem, F.A. consider blended learning to be generally acknowledged as falling somewhere between these two extremes, incorporating elements of each [2]. The term blended learning reflects the different approaches to learning, namely the use of the advantages of eLearning in combination with face-to-face learning, the combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning within online courses as well as the use of different technological solutions (computer, mobile phone, satellite TV, video conferencing, etc.) to implement training activities. Pedagogical approaches to using information technology in the learning process are very diverse: from the modernization of traditional methods to create new methods[4]. Graham, C.R. states that blended learning is the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed learning systems [1]. According to A. Heinze and C. Procter, blended learning is learning that is facilitated by the effective

combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and is based on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course [3]. M. Oliver and K. Trigwell believe that blended learning is based on a mixture of two or more components, such as various means of information delivery, different pedagogical approaches, combining theoretical with practical work within one course [5].

Thus, blended learning can be defined as integrating technology into classroom learning and teaching. Today it can refer to any combination of different methods of learning, different learning environments, different learning styles. In short, the effective implementation of this approach is essentially all about making the most of the learning opportunities and tools available to achieve optimal learning environment. Blended learning is the integration of digital tools, techniques and materials with the physical classroom. In a blended course, students may view lectures, access readings, ask questions, and complete assignments online in virtual learning environments like Moodle and through online classrooms such as Zoom, freeing up in-person class periods for discussions, activities and traditional lectures. Blended learning combines the freedom of e-learning with the opportunity to personally interact with lecturers and students. For example, the lecturer, or facilitator, may assign an online video for students to watch, then spend the class discussing the content, demonstrating different methods and allowing students to practice techniques with immediate, instructive feedback. Blended learning offers numerous other benefits, including flexibility: (busy, geographically dispersed and mature students have more control over their schedules, avoiding the hassle of a daily commute); independence (students often develop independence and motivation by working in their own time at their own pace); diversification (students have access to a rich array of learning tools and styles they may not encounter in the traditional classroom); support (students experience the personal engagement and support of interacting with their lecturers and classmates while benefiting from the flexibility of online delivery).

Virtual Learning Environment is a collection of integrated tools enabling the management of online learning, providing a delivery mechanism, student tracking, assessment and access to resources. Typically VLEs integrate the following tools:

- Communication. Firstly, they support communication between students and tutors, between students and students or across student groups through synchronous (or real-time) chat and asynchronous online discussions tools. Students can use these facilities to build upon their existing knowledge and create new ideas through online debate and discussion. Some discussion areas can be linked to course material and

online quizzes and self-tests. Other communication tools include online calendars, diaries or timetables. These can provide an overview of key events during courses and might include submission dates for assessments, reminders about TV/radio programmes to watch/listen to and additional meetings (online or face-to-face). The calendar can also be linked to other areas within the VLE, such as course content. Some VLEs may have email facilities which can be used for communicating on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis. Using an email system within the VLE has the advantage of keeping messages about the course separate from other email communications. For instance, a VLE can provide a virtual space where students can discuss, interact, share learning, ideas and materials while learning ESP. For example, students may work together on a specific case study before loading their summary into an online discussion. This summary can be compared with other summaries posted. The feedback will draw upon a wide range of working experiences which can then be related to the specific area of discussion. This draws on the experience of the whole group which is particularly useful in multi-disciplinary courses.

- Assessment. VLEs have tools for formative and summative assessment. Self-tests can be used by students for quick concept-checking and 'formative' feedback. Quizzes can provide guidance for both the tutor and the students; the results can highlight key areas that have not been fully understood by the student and which the tutor or teaching team can then cover in later sessions, online or face-to-face. Tutor feedback provided in these assessment tools is a key element in helping students develop an understanding of a subject; it is essential that tutors provide comprehensive feedback and not just indicate whether a question is 'right' or 'wrong'. Students can submit assignments within a particular area of the VLE. This can be set up to indicate the time and date of submission. Assessment marks can be released to students (individually) online. This is particularly relevant for distance learning students.

- Collaboration. There are tools that can support collaboration within and across student groups. For example, the file upload facilities in a VLE allow tutors and students to share resources by moving learning materials (for example articles, notes, images, PowerPoint files, etc) into the VLE. This can be achieved by dragging-and-dropping the file into a designated area within the VLE. Whiteboard software is a useful way of 'visualising' ideas and concepts. This software allows students to draw images collaboratively or, alternatively, to upload images and discuss them using chat facilities (text or audio communication) while simultaneously viewing the image.

- Other facilities which may be available in a VLE include student tracking which will provide tutors with information about when a student first accessed a course, how frequently they have accessed it and which areas they have accessed. It is essential that students know that you have access to this tool and you may also want to check with your IT department regarding their security and intervention policies.

The Moodle system constitutes itself as a virtual learning environment (VLE), where the learning process is completed online, representing a software open source and is destined to support a collaborative learning environment. It constitutes a new learning framework, based on the constructivist pedagogy where both teaching staff and students meet, complete collaborative activities and create information (www.moodle.org). As a free of charge resource, it can be installed on a server in order to be accessed from any computer connected to the Internet. It has a simple and logical interface, organised by modules; as a result, it can be easily used by users that do not have very advanced digital competences as well. By means of this platform an interactive way of action between teaching staff and students is provided. Within this virtual environment students learn by direct, collaborative participation, where both students and teaching staff can have synchronised or non-synchronised access to the platform. Moodle can be successfully used both in the educational system, and in private or public institutions. Moodle can be used in universities in various purposes, both in full-time and part-time learning, e-learning or blended learning, both in the initial and continuous formation. This e-learning platform provides users with a series of communication facilities, such as forum, chat and message system, wiki space and so on (www.docs.moodle.org). By means of forums there is an opportunity to communicate with their mates or their professors asynchronously i.e. at any time, provided an Internet connection exists. The forum discussions can be related to general interest topics or can be focused on a certain topic, where any user can initiate a discussion. Unlike forum, the Chat system provides the opportunity of synchronised, real-time communication between the users on the course platform. By the message system, private communication between users is completed. In Moodle, wiki is a space where students can complete collaborative activities. Ideal for being used in groups, it can be used in seminar or project activities.

Moodle platform is one of the most effective systems designed to help teachers create online courses with a number of different modules (lessons, quizzes and resources) and possibilities of application in the learning context (types of tasks and exercises) and incorporation of new modules, thus guaranteeing the functionality of its use and providing the

possibility of adding or suppressing information when necessary. Although the platform is not designed particularly for language teaching, it provides a number of useful learning tools that can be used in teacher training projects. It allows the integration of a wide range of resources, a variety of questions, glossaries, tests, case studies and exercises, including any kind of documents, multimedia resources such as graphics, video or audio (e.g., MP3 files), PowerPoint etc. It can provide opportunities for genuine interaction online. One of the simplest communication tools is a forum, or chat. The teacher's role is to monitor this interaction and decide how best to manage it. From a didactic point of view, the usage of multimedia tools to create attractive activities makes the learning process friendlier for students. As a consequence, these activities increase the interest of the students in their studies. Teachers can provide students with a large amount of resources that they cannot usually show in the classroom due to time constraints.

The use of VLEs such as Moodle for teaching ESP has a number of advantages. Moodle facilitates student-centered learning. To work on the platform, students can practice themselves using the online materials. Content can be studied according to their interests and their proficiency. Lessons and supported activities are provided in Moodle so that they can be selective in their studies. It facilitates anytime-anyplace learning. This characteristic makes it easy for students to study online whenever and wherever they want. Besides studying in the classroom, they are provided opportunities to study based on their times of convenience. Moodle makes course administration easier. In this system, teachers are seen as the course administrators who are responsible for course content. It is convenient for teachers in many perspectives. For example, they can use the learning environment to create or store materials. This VLE can be one tool to transfer their instruction. Moodle helps reduce the cost and time of delivering instruction. Teachers can save time in creating materials for their teaching. Moreover, they also save paper because those materials are online and students can visit websites without printing their workout. They do not need to have any budget for these materials. Encourage student-staff contact. The disadvantages of using Moodle in teaching ESP relate to technology issues such as the Internet connection, insufficient training of teachers etc.

The process of learning English for Specific Purposes can be divided into two parts: face-to-face learning and blended learning with Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle). Firstly, it is necessary to decide what kinds of activities it is reasonable to use. It can be theoretical grammar material, video and audio lessons conducted by native speakers, individual

tasks, project activities, tests, online forums and chats, supplementary reading of authentic books. Then it is necessary to decide what kinds of activities it is necessary to use in the face-to-face form. Blended learning is not new and unknown to students in Ukraine, but sometimes it is necessary to organize overview lectures, where an instructor explains all the details of blended learning. Overview lectures can be used to identify language level, investigate interests and needs of each student that will enable to adapt syllabus to new requirements. It is worth conducting practical face-to-face classes for students, who just begin to study English for Specific Purposes, because, for example, teaching explanation of new terms and concepts is very important, time-consuming and control-demanding work. Face-to-face instruction can also be used for intermediate and final control (examinations), work results presentation and individual consultations to help students to cope with emerged difficulties.

Moodle as VLE for teaching ESP provides a teacher with a number of tools to stimulate the educational process. The discussion tools can be used to encourage student co-operation in small or large groups, face-to-face or online. Areas can also be created in a VLE for students to share work. For example, groups of students can have a private area where they develop their group presentation. They may choose to work together face-to-face and then load their work into the VLE for others, including the tutor, to review. Through careful course design, focusing on student activities, a teacher can encourage active learning. For example, before loading materials into the VLE, a teacher should think about what he/she wants the students to do and how these activities will help fulfil the learning outcomes. For example, if a tutor wants them to review an economic article, he/she can divide the group into mini groups and ask them to review the article from different perspectives: from a customer, an individual, a company, the government etc. These could all be housed in the VLE with groups commenting on each other's work. In Moodle the assessment tools including quizzes and the assessment dropbox assist timely feedback. Quizzes can provide a wealth of feedback for students. Not only can they inform students if the answers are correct but they can provide pointers to further study, hints and tips and links to additional readings. Moreover by using a VLE in teaching ESP, having a link to Library resources and online resources, students can spend time working through activities that a teacher have developed rather than searching through shelves and surfing the web. This means they focus on the task rather than getting the materials for the task. As the tutor, a teacher can use a VLE to show what he/she expects of

students. With agreement from students, he/she can use examples of previous students' work to show the level of work that you expect and why.

However despite the number of advantages of the use of VLE in teaching ESP tutors and students can have some issues:

- Technical problems: robustness of system; lack of access to the Internet and computers for students; lack of student IT skills.

- Learners will need constant reminding to use your module in a VLE and will need a specific reason to visit. It is useful to keep reminding students about the VLE and its uses and role in the face-to-face sessions.

- Lack of student involvement. Students can use a VLE as an information repository, i.e. visit the VLE once or twice and print out all the materials and then not return again. To activate students' work it is important in the planning stage to think about how learners will use the resources. It is better in the design stage to focus on small sections which comprise a task and associated content.

- Once students are involved in online learning and using the VLE, they can become very demanding in their support requirements. It is essential that a teacher set clear guidelines at the beginning about their role, their frequency of access and particularly with online discussions, their input.

- Not all students find working online and using a VLE easy. Students are used to working in a face-to-face learning environment and will require support to help them adjust their study skills to the VLE environment. Students are familiar and comfortable with 'chalk and talk' face-to-face sessions. They are used to being passive receivers of 'content' from the tutor. Taking responsibility for their learning and becoming more independent learners may place them outside their comfort zone. Therefore it is important that you prepare them for this experience especially when launching your course in a VLE. Careful planning of your course with a VLE is essential.

- Students may complain about the lack of spontaneity in a VLE especially using computer mediated communication; they may dislike the lack of immediacy, quick responses and turn taking which are common in seminars but not possible in online discussions. They could also be frustrated with the time required for asynchronous online feedback and the increased length of time for decisions to be made. Many of these issues can be overcome through careful planning and course design.

The blended learning with Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle) in teaching English for Specific Purposes has great potential due to the following reasons: it allows to use up-to-date language material, chosen in accordance with student's interests, needs and abilities; creation of distance learning courses, designed for students of different language

levels, allows every student to learn language on appropriate level and each learner can compare his/her knowledge in the beginning and in the end of semester; it gives an opportunity to vary tasks and make them really creative and research; teacher has an opportunity to use face-to-face lessons and individual consultations. It promotes students' interest to participate in numerous activities (vocabulary and grammar exercises, online quizzes, forums, listening and watching tasks) to develop general and professionally-oriented communicative language competences in ESP that will facilitate their academic and professional mobility, enable to function competently in a professional and academic context, and provide them with a platform for lifelong learning.

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