THE USE OF BLENDED LEARNING AS AN IN-CURRICULUM DISCIPLINE

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Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate, through a case study, the main aspects of the implementation and development of the discipline English at the School of Business and Hospitality of University Anhembi Morumbi (Brazil), member of the Laureate International Universities, aiming at the University internationalization. The course implementation occurred in hybrid modality, blended learning. We will show the implementation and development of the program, the receptivity of the students regarding the passage from English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to General English (GE) and some evaluative aspects of the hybrid model, plus some results related to student satisfaction in the program.

Keywords: English, blended learning, in-curriculum discipline, case study

Introduction

Since the advent of personal computers and technological advances in the last decades, language teaching has gone hand in hand with technology, which has become a valuable tool in the classroom for mother tongue and foreign language learning (Beatty, 2013; Boswood, 1997; Brierley, 1991; Chester, 1987; Sabourin & Tarrab, 1994; Lee, Jor, & Lai, 2005; Szendeffy, 2005; Towndrow, 2007).

When considering the paradigm shift, both in education and in the learning process, it can be observed that there are a number of assumptions that encourage the use of the computer (technology) in the acquisition of the mother tongue, foreign language and additional languages. In this perspective, it is known that digital information and communication technologies are able to establish context for collaboration and social interaction in which learners will build their own knowledge of the target language due to involvement in meaningful activities.

Technology in the area of education, and particularly in the area of language teaching, is already widespread. In the last decade alone, a large number of additional language teachers have been trained to master the technology to become familiar with its use in the process of teaching and learning English.

However, the change of mentality regarding the use of technology in the teaching of English has been slow; many still seem resistant to its use, but there are signs that the pace is starting to accelerate with the spread of *user-friendly* tools and software (Dudeney & Hockly, 2012). In this context, one of the main points for the adhesion of more teachers to the use of technology in language teaching has been their own experience within technology itself in distance learning (DL), especially owing to a growing number of professionals involved in several daily activities. Moreover, a great number of such professionals are only able to find time to professionally improve through online teacher training or educational courses.

In countries where there is more advancement in educational technology and government development, it is noted that one of the most popular technological tools in primary and secondary education is the *smart board*. According to Dudeney and Hockly (2012), the success of this type of technology is largely related to the fact that it has, in its core the metaphor – the blackboard – and it gives the computer a secondary or almost invisible role in the classroom. In the case of foreign language learners – the vast majority of them, especially the younger ones, are familiar with media such as blogs, Wikis, podcasts, streams, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, etc. It is expected that, due to this familiarity, the trend of using technological tools in education and teaching will increase dramatically in the coming years. The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)[1] has shown considerable growth in recent decades, despite some resistance from some teachers and students. Moreover, society, in a generic way, has been impacted by the Internet, and only a few are able to live without it nowadays. Saliés and Shepherd (2013) state that linguistics itself cannot give up these spaces for its studies and analyzes and that the last frontier in which technology is impacting society is the Internet, in which more than 1,000 languages are represented. According to the authors, in consultation with World Stats[2], the ten most used languages on the Internet by 2011 were, in this order, English, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, German, Arabic, French, Russian and Korean. Therefore, within this context of teaching and learning languages with the use of technology, we will present a study on the teaching of English as a curricular discipline at the university level, utilizing blended learning, in which we will discuss the design and implementation of the program, as well as its development and evaluation.

Why Choose Blended Learning?

Many papers on blended learning point to it as the learning that shares the best of electronic learning and traditional learning environments. Nevertheless, little is said that a blended learning environment can combine disadvantages of both environments when not well executed (Graham, 2006). There often seems to be an exclusionary approach to face-to-face or online classes. Some students may prefer the total on-campus experience vesus attending the traditional classroom while others opt for fully online learning. Some programs, however, offer a blended approach. This is the model we experienced and therefore will discuss.

In our case, for example, we had a face-to-face lesson once a week, with much of the course being done online. Another basic distinction in the 100% online,

traditional and blended model is that 100% online courses can be composed of students from various places. For example, students in virtual classes may be from Brazil, Lithuania, Greece, soldiers serving in other countries, etc. Nonetheless, traditional on-campus courses are usually more localized or regional. Students tend to be in a context with members of a group who come from the same city or state and attend common environments. These groups tend to be more socially and culturally homogeneous. In terms of interaction, the online model enhances contact with other students in other areas, while the face-to-face version allows closer ties between students from the same community or nearby. Therefore, the advantage of the blended model is the mix of online and face-to-face students, enabling a better interactive network at the local, regional as well as global levels. Such a practice can affect factors such as school avoidance, employability, and the level of student interest.

An Investigation of Blended Learning

The case study presented here describes an investigation of blended learning developed between the years of 2012 to 2015 at Anhembi Morumbi University – São Paulo. As coordinators of the program through these years, we worked administering the teaching of English for the business school courses such as administration, marketing, international relations, foreign trade, and for the hospitality school that included hotel management and tourism. At its peak, during this period, the program had 10 hired teachers and 2,294 students, integrating the Laureate International Network. We have chosen this qualitative research method to examine real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of the blended learning implementation.

The Program

The number of students who attended the program constantly grew, except in 2013-14 when there was a curricular change, when the discipline of English began to be offered only in the second semester in most of the courses. Divided among business school and hospitality students, as represented in Figure 1, total students reached: 1,508 (2012 – semester 1), 1,702 (2012 – semester 2), 1,728 (2013 – semester 1), 1,621 (2013 – semester 2), 1,900 (2014 – semester 1), 1,901 (2014 – semester 2) and 2,294 (2015 – semester 1). In general, the participation of the discipline in the curricular matrices of the courses was high.
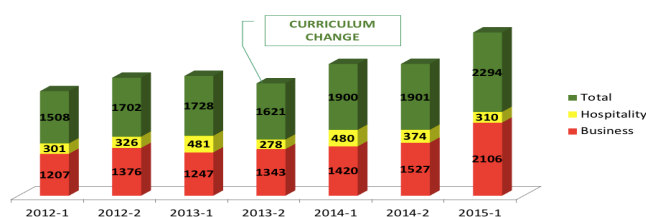

Figure 1. Number of students enrolled in the program.

English has taken 15% (320 hours) of the total course hours (3,000 hours). Figure 2 represents this proportionality.
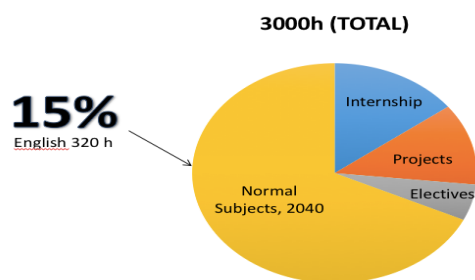
Figure 2. Total course hours and the number of hours of in-curriculum English.

The Blended Learning Methodology

The program employed the blended methodology and the hours of dedication to the discipline of English for all these courses, was part face-to-face and part online. The face-to-face classes corresponded to 50% of the course hours, the remaining hours were fulfilled in a virtual learning environment (VLE) that registered the presence, participation and performance of the students. The VLE used by the students was the CambridgeLMS online platform that corresponded to and complemented two books: *Touchstone* and *View Point* (Cambridge University Press). The books were used in the classroom, and teachers presented the topics face-to-face, both respecting the characteristics of the group of students and gradually demanding activities to be fulfilled in the VLE.

Group Leveling and Placement Tests

In pursuit of accreditation and quality indexes, the program established the following criteria and procedures in the division of student groups:

1. Once enrolled in the program, students sat for a placement test and were classified in terms of knowledge in the language. The CEFR[3] scale was used to level the students.

2. Students were divided into groups of no more than 30 students for each teacher in their respective classes.

3. To solve internal procedures, the Business Administration, Marketing and International Relations students from the first semester of 2014 on, were grouped into pools; we didn't consider their the course they were taking, but their level of English. This way, Marketing students could be placed together with International Relations students based on their level of English.

The division of the classes into pools respected the level of knowledge in the language, campus and period, not the course of the student. Figure 3 shows a sample of students' entry level at one of the university campuses.
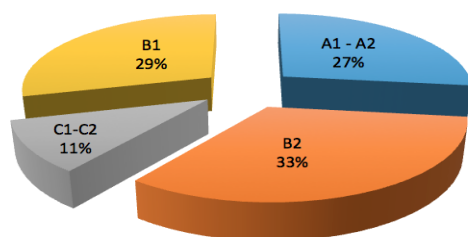
Figure 3. Levels of entry (CEFR) based on the leveling test - Campus Vila Olímpia 2014 – 2.

General English Teaching and ESP Teaching

The complexity of teaching English at the university level imposes the following dilemma: Should the course be geared towards the student's academic or professional background? In other words, should it focus on language learning for communication or on language use for the labor market? Besides, the students were used to having ESP[4] classes, and the implementation of the new curriculum, encompassing General English (GE) would be a paradigm change. The answer to such a question is not simple, and we believe that a hybrid education model is the best choice.

Justification

According to EF[5], a global education consulting company focusing on language, academic, cultural exchange, and educational travel programs, Brazil has a low level of proficiency in English (41th position), which impedes Brazil's insertion into a globalized context. This fact corroborates the idea that the model of English practiced in higher education (only ESP classes) is far from ideal, as the level of the majority of students who enter university is low.

The flexibility provided by the blended learning model allowed our teachers to work together with Second Language Teaching (ESL) and language teaching for specific purposes. The chosen model could privilege all modalities: (a) ESP in the face-to-face model, since the teacher was able to evaluate items such as language level, students' interest, relevance and relevance to elaborate significant activities for the students' professional training; (b) ESL in the online model, because the students, respected in their rhythm and level, could carry out the activities as many times as they pleased until they felt comfortable with a certain content. In a non-exclusive way in the classroom, the teacher interfered (synchronously) in the students' learning and worked on productive skills concerning language; the students, in turn, performed tasks at home concerning the application of English for their professional needs.

One major advantage of the blended model seems to be the teacher's sensitivity factor for delivering GE and the ESP approach in face-to-face and online activities, according to the particularities of each group. The level was also respected in our case: the higher the student's knowledge in the language, the greater the proportion of online activities in ESL, because their degree of independence in learning is greater.

Evaluation

With regard to the online evaluation system, we observed that it could be advantageous. The advantages of online assessment are: (a) assertiveness, (b) continuity and process assessment, (c) reduced demand for teacher activities, and (d) familiarization with common assessment models in the labor market. In addition, throughout the semester, two written individual performance assessments and one (or more) oral assessment (s) were performed and served as an online student performance check tool as well as a diagnostic tool for reorienting the teachers' work. In the specific case of the online performance of the apprentice, the Gradebook – a software present on the Cambridge LMS platform – was used to assign notes to the activities performed by the students. The Gradebook is useful for gauging miscellaneous skills notes, such as reading activities, listening comprehension, and even the ability to speak. By means of that, the written practice could be better tested in blogs, discussion forums and Wikis. Teachers were able to determine which assessment tools to use, provided they considered the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

In the case of the evaluation of the program, for us to check whether the program was working or not, we tested our students through the Cambridge Proficiency Exam. To do this, we used a sample of students who had reached the fourth semester of the English language course (English IV) of the program in May 2013. For the most basic levels, we chose *Test Level-2* (CEFR Level) – and for the more advanced students, we used the *Test Level-4* (CEFR Level). As the test was not compulsory, we obtained a sample of 208 students, of which 74 were tested for level 2, and the other 134 students were tested for level 4. The students, on the day of the proficiency examination, filled out a questionnaire with some personal information (age, address, etc.) and also answered a questionnaire about how they saw the progress of their English and how they evaluated the program. Here are some results.

Results

The students' satisfaction index with the program was measured by anonymous semester surveys conducted by teachers in the classroom. Surveys occurred from 2012-2 to 2014-1 and the results were very promising (see Figure 4).
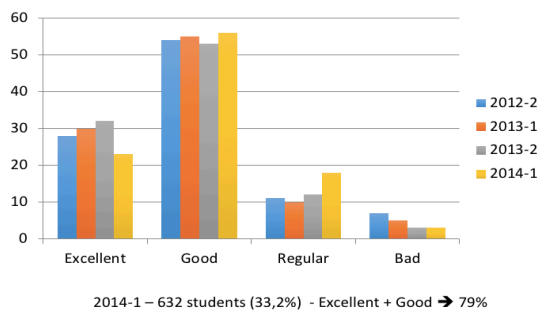

2014-1 – 632 students (33,2%) - Excellent + Good ➔ 79%

Figure 4. Percentage of students' satisfaction.

We believe that the good acceptance of the program is also due to the evident need to learn English because of its recognition as an international language. McKay (2003) estimates that by 2025 there will be more speakers of English as a second language than speakers of English as the first language because the language serves not only for local needs but also for communication on a large scale. This finding was very evident in the questionnaire that the students answered in the Cambridge English proficiency test on the subject (Figure 5). Questions 12, 15, and 18 indicated that students agree that English is important for work (question 12), international communication (question 15), and personal satisfaction (question 18).

		I strongly disagree			I strongly agree	
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
12	I want to learn English because I will need it for my job.	2.0%	5.9%	10.8%	14.2%	67.2%
15	I want to learn English because it makes travelling to other countries easier.	1.5%	6.9%	11.3%	20.7%	59.6%
18	Doing well in English is important to me.	1.0%	1.0%	6.9%	22.1%	69.1%

Figure 5. Cambridge English proficiency test questions.

Concluding Remarks

Test Level-2 (CEFR Level) result shows that almost 90% of the student sample was at A2 level (CEFR) or below. However, among Level 4 students – *Test Level-4*, showed that almost 95% were between level A2 and B2. The results obtained were valuable for the program evaluation and consequent planning actions for improvement.

In our specific case, during the implementation of the English Language course in the curriculum in the Business School courses of the Anhembi Morumbi University, using blended learning as a teaching methodology, we were able to understand some points that allow the reflection and evaluation of this model.

First, as positive points, we have the results of learners' evaluations (self-evaluation) indicating an appreciation for the program and the teaching methodology. In the area of contents presented, the students were tested, after being divided into two distinct levels, by the Cambridge Proficiency Test, and we obtained, as can be seen in the presented results, a promising scenario, viz., we had high levels of approval for both levels tested in comparison with the Brazilian test scores.

Nonetheless, we faced some challenges during the establishment and maturation of this project. For example, there were times when we had an insufficient number of levels, given that the CEFR scale has 6 levels and the maximum amount of levels offered, even with pools, was 3. This is due to limitations established by the institution, because it is a curricular discipline, which has scheduled and established days. Thus, it is evident that many students were left out of their ideal groups, viz., there were students who were

below or above their level of knowledge of English. The teachers' effort to accommodate the situation was valid, but did not meet the specific needs of the students. Therefore, some curricular restructuring actions were speculated and outlined by the institution to remedy this deficiency, but all of them in the long term, because they required curricular and organizational flexibilization.

Although the majority of students considered the course good or excellent, many still, especially the most advanced ones, clamored for the insertion of the discipline English for Specific Purposes (not general English + ESP) because they believed that being in the university environment and professional context for each area, they should learn specific language related to the course they chose at the university. In general, teachers found it difficult to find and elaborate activities at the appropriate level for each group that addressed subjects relevant to the area of professional activity of each course and that required the use of the four skills in the language. It is our opinion that the most appropriate action in this case would be the organization of a sequence of contents for all semesters of the course that has in-curricular English. The topic addressed should dialogue with the other subjects of the students in that semester to become more relevant. An activity bank and ESP activities (by level) were created and shared among teachers and, as a consequence, there was little or no chance of replicated activities. The bank of questions and activities provides a diversification in the style of activity throughout the course and consequent reduction of the sense of strangeness on the part of the student.

Another challenge for blended learning in this project to be considered was the adherence to the VLE (Figure 6).
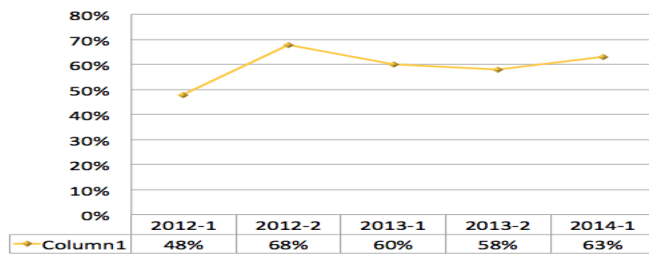

	2012-1	2012-2	2013-1	2013-2	2014-1
Column1	48%	68%	60%	58%	63%

Figure 6. Percentage of students' adherence to VLE.

For effective learning to occur in this methodology, it is fundamental that the students perform their assignments in the period that is reserved to be engaged in online activities. The model implemented in the program provided for the non-obligatory adherence to VLE and respective activities in this environment.

Briefly, a bonus policy was established which, despite being appealing, did not reach all students and, as a result, an average of 40% of the students did not participate in the VLE (see Figure 6). Making participation in the VLE mandatory is a response to the problem that immediately came to mind. However, we agree that meritocracy directly affects the students' enthusiasm

for learning and, apparently, factors such as will and interest – which drive the leading role in education – are especially important for learning a foreign or additional language. The period in which the students spend outside the school boundaries and even outside the VLE limits seems to be determinant in the progression of learning. Therefore, this is an issue to be addressed and deepened in further studies mainly in contexts in which the internationalization of the Brazilian universities is aspirated, such as the current one.

Notes

1. Also known in the American context as LMS (Learning Management System).

2. Access: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.html

3. CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) for Languages, which places students in levels A1 (beginner), A2 (elementary stage), B1 (low intermediate), B2 (high intermediate), C1 (operational effective) and C2 (proficient).

4. English for specific purposes.

5. Education First. (2017). EF EPI: Índice de proficiência em inglês da EF. Education First - English Proficiency Index 2017. Retrieved from https://www.ef.com.br/epi/

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