

USE OF BLENDED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION TO ENHANCE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of the study related to the use of a blended learning approach in higher education. Blended learning is a relatively new educational trend that combines conventional face-to-face and online teaching modes. In the era of informatization and digitalization of society blended learning as a learning method is becoming more and more popular among educators and learners. The aim of the research is to investigate the influence of the blended learning approach on students' intercultural competence and English language skills. Research methods applied: the review of the literature and a project feedback questionnaire data collection and analysis. The findings show that the blended learning approach can enhance students' English language skills and intercultural competence.

Keywords: *blended learning, English language skills, intercultural competence, learning platform*

Rezumat

În articol, facem o trecere în revistă a cercetărilor cu referire la utilizarea abordării blended learning în învățământul superior. Învățarea mixtă este o tendință educațională relativ nouă, care combină modurile convenționale de predare face-to-face și online. În era informatizării și digitalizării societății, învățarea combinată ca metodă de învățare devine din ce în ce mai populară în rândul educatorilor și studenților. Scopul cercetării este de a investiga influența abordării blended learning asupra competenței interculturale și a abilităților de limbă engleză ale elevilor. În cercetare, facem apel la următoarele procedee: revizuirea literaturii de specialitate, chestionarul de feedback al proiectului, colectarea și analiza datelor. Rezultatele arată că abordarea învățării mixte poate îmbunătăți abilitățile de limbă engleză și competența interculturală ale elevilor.

Cuvinte-cheie: *învățare mixtă, abilități de limbă engleză, competență interculturală, platformă de învățare*

Introduction

Due to the globalization processes, the labour market demands specialists with very good English language skills and intercultural competence. According to the latest report on the fastest-growing job skills for businesses, governments and higher education institutions "The Job Skills of 2023" prepared by the MOOC platform Coursera, culture ranks as the 6th fastest-

growing human skill in 2023 (with a rank change of +18 compared to the previous year), and communication as a human skill takes the high place 9 on the same top with a rank change of +15 (Coursera, 2022, p. 11).

Along with the globalization processes, technology is also constantly evolving, therefore, lecturers must stay up-to-date with the new tools and methods that can help them deliver effective instruction to students coming from a wide range of backgrounds and having varying learning styles and needs.

If we look around, we can see that the rapid digitalization and informatization of society and the recent COVID-19 pandemic have already changed our lifestyle: “We live in a blended world. Most of us weave online and face-to-face interactions with people every day. We are each “blending” physical and digital activities to create personalized, optimal life experiences. This is what blended education is all about designing learning experiences online or onsite, based on the relative strengths and weaknesses of each mode” (Stein & Graham, 2020, p. 7).

This might be the reason why blended learning has become quite popular in higher education in recent years (Watson, 2008, p. 3), (Albiladi & Alsharreef, 2019, p. 237), as institutions seek to take advantage of the flexibility and convenience of online learning while still providing students with the personal interaction and support of a traditional classroom setting.

Therefore, the paper will focus on interpreting the data obtained during the Erasmus+ project “Cultural Knowledge and Language Competences as Means to Develop 21st-Century Skills” to determine the extent to which a blended learning approach is effective in improving students’ English language skills and intercultural competence.

Theoretical Background

Blended learning as a concept has been used by scholars for a few decades already, but Martin Oliver and Keith Trigvel find the term ‘blended learning’ is “ill-defined and inconsistently used”, as “all definitions lack an analysis from the perspective of the learner” (Oliver & Keith Trigvel, 2005, p. 24).

One that summarizes most of them is given by a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank the Clayton Christensen Institute: “Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns: at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and the modalities along each student’s learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience”.

According to Watson, blended learning can also be referred to as hybrid learning (Watson, 2008, p. 4).

Despite the fact that scholars are not capable of agreeing on a single definition, Sharma believes that “blended learning” as a concept will stay around and will be used especially in the language teaching context, as blended learning is focused on “the search for ‘best practice’, i.e. the attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience” (Sharma, 2010, pp. 457-458).

Tucker, Wycoff and Green, three young American education practitioners and co-authors of a practical guide on blended learning, believe that, if successfully implemented, blended learning can enhance the following classroom practices:

- *Personalization*: providing unique learning pathways for individual students;
- *Agency*: giving learners opportunities to participate in key decisions in their learning experience;
- *Authentic Audience*: giving learners the opportunity to create for a real audience both locally and globally;
- *Connectivity*: giving learners opportunities to experience learning in collaboration with peers and experts locally and globally;
- *Creativity*: providing learners individual and collaborative opportunities to make things that matter while building skills for their future” (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 6).

In addition to that, Stein and Graham suggest that blended learning provides benefits to all - students, teachers and institutions; they are: “increased access and convenience, improved learning, decreased (or more flexible) costs” (Stein & Graham, 2020, p. 10). They also believe that, if done right, blended learning compared to a face-to-face learning environment can increase student engagement through online social interaction, as onsite activities usually have limited engagement opportunities; blended courses may be better intentionally designed than onsite ones; blended courses can provide increased guidance through activities, resources, and assessments; students tend to be more focused, as their online activity is trackable; and as learners have easier access to all the activities and materials, students can become drivers of their learning process (*idem*, pp. 11-12).

In “The SAGE Handbook of International Competence” the term “competence” has been defined as “a set of abilities or skills” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 6), whereas “intercultural competence” as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (*idem*, p. 7). A very similar definition of “intercultural competence” can be found in “The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence”: “a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral

skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett, 2015, pp. xxv-xxvii).

Culture is a term, “concerned with enduring yet evolving intergenerational attitudes, values, beliefs, rituals/customs, and behavioral patterns into which people are born but that is structurally created and maintained by people’s ongoing actions” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, pp. 6-7). According to C. R. Tucker, T. Wycoff and J. T. Green, “the common theme of any definition of culture is that it is based on shared values, created and perpetuated by people. These values, attitudes, and beliefs combine to yield patterns of behavior, and consequently impact how stakeholders feel about those behaviours” (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 7).

“The components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills, and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one’s belonging to a number of social groups, values which are part of one’s belonging to a given society” (Byram et al., 2010, p. 5).

Research Methodology

The aim of this research is to investigate the influence of the blended learning approach on students’ intercultural competence and English language skills.

Research question: Can a blended learning approach improve students’ English language skills and intercultural competence in higher education?

The sample of this study comprises 271 students from six partner countries: 34 students were from Croatia, 45 from Latvia, 34 from Poland, 76 from Romania, 49 from Slovenia and 33 from the Czech Republic.

Figure 1 shows the number of respondents per country:

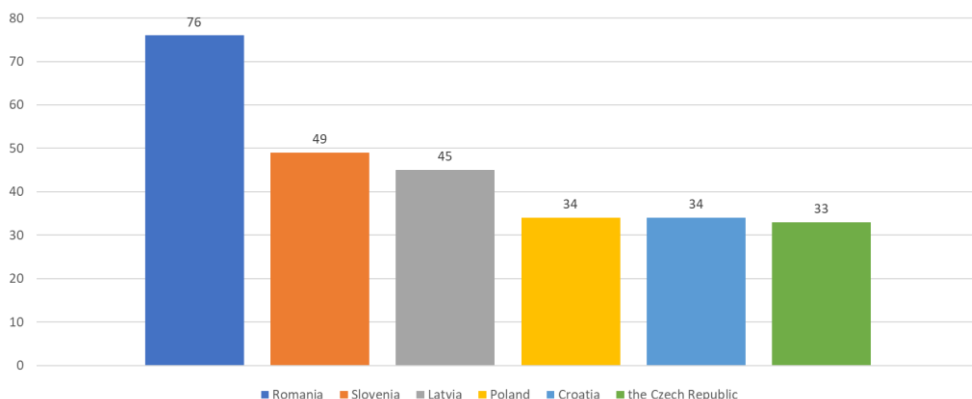


Figure 1. Number of respondents per country

Research methods: data collection using a project feedback questionnaire.

Research process: each student was offered to study one of the modules during the language classes and independently from February to April 2019

while piloting the Erasmus+ project “Cultural Knowledge and Language Competences as Means to Develop 21st-Century Skills”.

Findings

As mentioned previously, blended learning approach is more and more widely used as a method to work successfully with students coming from various countries which means having different backgrounds and learning styles.

The authors refer to the data collected during and by the end of the Erasmus+ project “Cultural Knowledge and Language Competences as Means to Develop 21st-Century Skills”.

Six countries - Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic - were involved in creating and piloting the online tasks for the project. Altogether eighteen modules were made with the purpose to be used for the blended learning language course. The content of the modules is based on the cultural heritage of the partner countries and comprises online and face-to-face activities. Each student was offered to study one of the modules during the language classes and independently. Teachers introduced them to the course and provided support while online tasks were completed. Besides that, the teachers monitored their students and took notes on their problems, comments, etc.

As each module is related to the intangible cultural heritage of one of the six countries, it provides insight into the culture of a particular country and raises students’ cultural awareness. The structure of all the modules is similar. It is like a story that introduces learners to an event, tradition or skill (heritage) of a particular country. It starts with an introduction and comprises a variety of tasks: reading, listening and writing tasks, doing crosswords, case studies, WebQuests, etc. - to proceed with the story. Learners had to follow the sequence in which the tasks appear in the module, as they have been designed to help learners to improve their language skills. Some of the online tasks were aimed at acquiring the vocabulary necessary to understand the texts, audio or video tasks better; others to revise particular grammar forms, improve writing skills and so on. Part of the tasks required more creativity, collaboration or discussion while at the same time providing an opportunity to “blend” students’ digital skills and face-to-face activities.

The authors use the data from the project feedback questionnaire for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire comprises 3 parts. The first part includes questions that help to gather information about students - such as age, gender, level of education, field of studies, etc. The second part requires filling in the evaluation form of the learning platform with 6 questions (five-point Likert scale questions) and answering 15 evaluation questions concerning the completed module (five-point Likert scale questions). The third part is the Kolb’s Learning Styles questionnaire.

The authors of this paper present their findings in accordance with the data from the project evaluation questionnaire concerning students’ opi-

nions on the learning platform available at: <http://e-culture.eu/>, and answers to 15 evaluation questions concerning the completed module. Although there is a limitation, as the authors have analyzed answers to questions 14 and 15, respectively, regarding the development of students' language skills and intercultural competence.

The students were offered to complete the project feedback questionnaire. The findings of this study are based on the information gathered from the first part of the questionnaire. The majority of the learners, i.e. 234 belong to the age group from 18 to 24, the students representing the age group from 25 to 34 and older than 34, respectively, 13 and 24. In total there were 147 female and 124 male students. The students represent a wide range of fields of study, including tourism (36), business and finance (25), economy (29), IT (32), management (31) and other fields (92), not answered (26).

Figure 2 shows the respondents' fields of study (values represent the actual counts of answers):

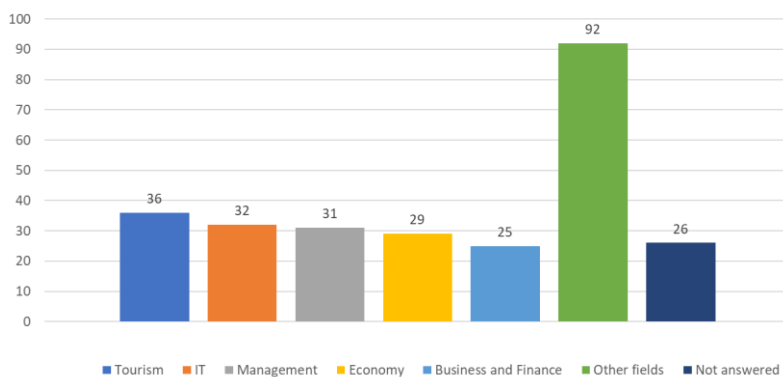


Figure 2. Respondents' fields of study

The findings of this paper are based on the six questions of the project evaluation questionnaire concerning students' opinions on the learning platform available at <http://e-culture.eu/>. Most of the students share the opinion that the platform is useful, interesting, and appealing. The average evaluation score for the platform's usefulness is 3.97, for being interesting and appealing, respectively, 3.98 and 3.55. However, part of the learners had difficulties understanding the platform and needed a lot of assistance, and the average score is 2.5. The possible reason could be a low level of their English language skills.

Correlations were found regarding development of language skills and intercultural competence, where score 5 - strongly agree - was noted, respectively, by 19% and 20 % of the respondents and score 4 - agree - was noted by 37 and 42%. Concerning development of language skills, 25% of respondents have noted score 3 - neutral and development of intercultural competence has been noted by 26% of respondents. Similarly, 9% of respondents

noted that they have not developed their language skills – score 2 – disagree and 6% that they have not developed their intercultural competence. And 7% of respondents noted with score 1 – strongly disagree - development of their language skills and 3 % -development of their intercultural competence.

Figure 3 shows students’ opinion regarding development of their language skills and intercultural competence after completing one of the modules:

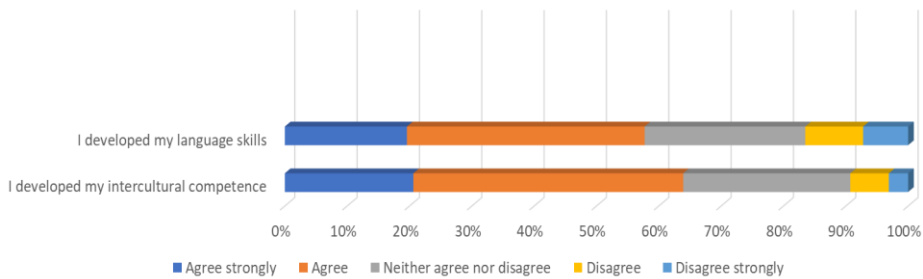


Figure 3. Students’ opinion regarding development of their language skills and intercultural competence after completing one of the modules (%)

Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored the use of blended learning in higher education and its contribution to enhance students’ English language skills and intercultural competence. The research results show that the blended learning approach and use of online tasks are relevant for the development of students’ English language skills. From the findings it is evident that 58% of the students have strongly agreed or agreed that they have developed their English language skills. Moreover, 25% have had a neutral opinion concerning the development of their language skills.

Similar results were obtained in a study carried out at the University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia showing that using blended learning in teaching EFL was very advantageous, namely, “84% of the respondents stated that their English language proficiency skills improved a lot” (Alkhaleel, 2021, p. 1). The results can also be confirmed by the research done at Al-Quds Open University, Palestine by Bakeer who pointed out that “blended learning had a positive effect in enhancing students’ English language skills” (Bakeer, 2018, p. 137). Moreover, other researchers Hashemi and Si Na concluded that “blended learning can be effective in enhancing the four skills of the English language such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening” (Hashemi & Si Na, 2020, p. 177). American scholars Albiladi and Alshareef from the University of Arkansas confirmed the same that the use of blended learning enhances the English learning process, develops language skills, and improves the English learning environment (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019, p. 237). Furthermore, the findings of the current research are in agreement with other studies by K.B.A. Al Bataineh, A.e.A.A. Banikalef and A. Albash-

tawi (Al Bataineh *et alii*, 2019, pp. 331-332), N. H. Alsowayegh, H. J. Bardesi, I. Garba, M.A. Sipra (Alsowayegh *et al.*, 2019, p. 280), M. N. Rahim (Rahim, 2019, p. 396) and S. Yudhana (Yudhana, 2021, p. 58), which all have stated the effectiveness of blended learning in the development of students' language skills.

Similarly, the current research showed that students' intercultural competence has improved. 62% of the students have strongly agreed or agreed that they have developed their intercultural competence, whereas 26% of students were not sure concerning the development of their intercultural competence. The finding accords with Adi from an Indonesian university who concluded that "students had a positive perception of the blended learning approach applied in their Cross-Cultural Understanding course. The course helped them to raise intercultural awareness toward people from different cultural backgrounds" (Adi, 2017, p. 35). Furthermore, according to scholars Roux, Suzuki, Matsuba and Goda's opinion the blended learning approach can moderately enhance intercultural competence: "evaluation showed effective intercultural learning, in addition to learners' self-reported, increased confidence in areas related to intercultural skill development" (Roux *et al.*, 2018, p. 27).

All in all, research shows that the blended learning approach can support the development of English language skills and intercultural competence.

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