

BLENDED LEARNING: WHERE TO START?

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Introductions.

In searching the ways to effectuate the process of getting knowledge most methodologists of education aspire to find out the resources to improve its acquiring by learners, being regular users of computer-mediated activities.

The solution of the problem proceeds from E-Learning Model imperfection, being currently introduced into the process of education, while traditional learning is no longer up to par with current state in education. That is why many researchers refer to the blended learning (BL) methodology in order to apply software for learning via Internet to overcome the problems, arising in education, as BL enables to combine traditional techniques and modern technologies.

In this respect the BL represents the educational concept, in the framework of which students acquire knowledge both independently online and in the course of face-to-face (F2F) sessions with language instructor in the class.

One of but not the only advantage of the method lies in its applicability to different audiences: it may be organized both for young learners, students as well as for adults training.

To realize the above approach it should be kept in mind that BL includes such integral components as distance learning (DL), face-to-face (F2F) learning and online learning.

Aim. The purpose of the article is to consider what should the language instructor take into account when planning a training course in the blended learning format at the example of the implementation experience in “Business English”

practical course training for Master-level students (specializing in “Agronomy”) at the Agrotechnological University.

Materials and methods.

To conduct classes in the BL format the author introduced authorized development of the tutorial for conducting face-to-face (F2F) and on-line BE classes for Master-level students (agronomists-to-be) at Agrotechnological University. The content of teaching materials of the above mentioned tutorial has been selected on the basis of the principle of motivational sufficiency from authentic sources. It includes the following sections: student’s book, workbook, individual assignment, English-Ukrainian dictionary, references to audio and video sources, self-check keys. Altogether 12 thematic units to be mastered are distributed into two modules per semester and include all kinds of tasks to develop competencies of relevant integrated skills.

Results and discussions.

So, where to start?

Primarily, when making a course, all the materials, having been chosen for training, were distributed into two parts – the part, designed for classroom work acquisition, another one – for individual work at home.

Then, the tasks, being suitable for individual work and those being more appropriate for group work to present so-called worked out ”products” (projects, presentations, essays , instructions writing, making up business documents and such like) were selected for discussing and assessing in group and together with the instructor. These are the activities to be planned for F2F sessions.

When selecting appropriate materials, their structuring, the projects working out, being presupposed for group work, creative activities working out as well as tasks for training, reference materials, additional materials from the net, tests (of any kind) - it is also important to provide the tasks, designed for gifted students (hopefully, in each group there some). “Job checker” should be conducted not only on the training platform online, but in class as well.

It should also be considered, that the basic course is mainly taught in full-time classes, while the advanced ones are mastered in the course of distance and online learning. It is reasonable to distribute creative activities that presuppose group/team work as well.

Besides, BL introduction enables to allocate resources and improve academic performance as it contributes to both independent and collaborative learning experience. According to the research, conducted in 1998, by Alexander Mackenzie the conclusion was made, that it is easier for students to evaluate their understanding of the material using computer-based evaluation modules.

Blended Learning is considered to be especially effective in teaching foreign languages, since it involves both the need for live communication, and the need in online reading, watching videos, visual “memorization” of words, introducing a gaming moment and interactivity that contribute much to memorization.

The classes in the case in question were arranged in changing sequence (3 F2F and 2 online classes), wherein F2F sessions are the stage, preparing students for fulfilling totally autonomous activities in the course of online classes, being provided with materials and resources for fulfilling various tasks aimed at integrated skills development.

Each unit includes watching videos provided with various tasks: training exercises, quizzes, tests, videos watching, essays writing, case studies; other activities, involving team work as well as the activities, being seldom if ever practiced in F2F class, such as peer-graded assignment and reviewing the peers. Modules are usually completed by summative assessment.

Conclusions.

When choosing blended format it is necessary to agree to fix a time frame (deadline) for all the participants of learning process to follow when making the tasks (for learners) and checking them (for instructors). It should be the general rule. The proposed and introduced changing sequence of classes (3 F2F and 2 online classes) in the given example confirmed its effectiveness due to:

- a) sufficient number of academic hours for class sessions (3 study couple/2 for 12 weeks, of which 3 - in the class, then 2 - online independently);
- b) regularly uniform frequency of classes within the period of 12 weeks ;
- c) strictly systematic change in 3 F2F and 2 online classes (contributed much to regular productive learning);
- d) highly motivated graduate students, who really demonstrated and confirmed in practice their wish to get new experience and tried their best (but motivation alone is not enough – as technical facilities should also be delivered for non-residential students as well as access to them);
- e) computer-mediated activities made possible and were provided due to systematic work of University library lab.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning, that working out of the training course of BL format is more suitable for groups of adult highly motivated students, who are ready to share responsibility for the results of their learning.

It could also be recommended to introduce such courses for ESP students as well.