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IMPLEMENTING BLENDED LEARNING
IN THE ELT CLASSROOMS WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Abstract

The use of ICT in education, and all of the advantages that come with it, have been recognized time and time again. However, despite the many benefits of ICT use, ranging from the development of critical thinking skills to the creation of learner-centered environments, there are also certain disadvantages connected to it. One of the main disadvantages related to the implementation of ICT in education has been the lack of resources. Many educational institutions and individuals, both teachers and students, deal with a lack of resources or resource limitations in terms of the number and type of available devices, the necessary software, technical support and training. In such situations, blended learning represents the best way of overcoming such obstacles and bridging the gap between traditional and computerized teaching. Essentially, blended learning unifies face-to-face teaching with online teaching in order to improve the teaching and learning processes. Therefore, this paper will focus on the possible ways of implementing blended learning in the English language classrooms with limited resources as a way of providing students with all of the necessary and pertinent online materials which would otherwise remain unused.

Keywords: *blended learning, ICT, resources, teaching, implementation.*

Introduction

The true beginning of blended learning, also known as hybrid or mixed mode learning, can be traced back to the 1990s and the slow introduction of the Internet. In fact, one of the very first mentions of the term itself can be tied to the year 1996 (Friesen, 2012, p. 1). Apart from the very approach, the terminology related to blended learning has also seen significant changes from the early start to the present day. While initially the term blended learning referred to any combination "of two or more distinct methods of training" (Clark, 2003, p. 4), in recent years the emphasis has shifted to the combination of the traditional, face-to-face learning, and online learning, with Garrison and Vaughn (2007, p. 5) decribing it as "the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences". The more inclusive definition describes blended learning as "almost any combination of technologies, pedagogies and even job tasks" (Friesen, 2012, p. 2). However, Bonk and Graham (2006) in their *Handbook of Blended Learning* defined blended learning as combining face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction and since then the definition "has been interpreted more or less similarly" (Ossiannilsson, 2017, p. 20). The most widely accepted definition of blended learning (Ossiannilsson, 2017, p. 21) describes blended learning as:

> "a formal education program in which a student learns; at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction, 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" (Christiansen et al., 2013, p. 8).

One of the basic principles related to blended learning is that of mediated social interaction. Mediated social interaction represents the interaction between two or more participants which is supported through the use of technology as the participants are, more often than not, separated by space and/or time (Lee, 2008, p. 3034). Therefore, in blended learning, the traditional in person approach is enhanced with the use of online instruction to offer further support and additional learning environment that is necessary to fully take advantage of all the learning possibilities.

Models of blended learning

Staker and Horn (2012, pp. 8-15) offer four possible models of blended learning; some of which are more suited for primary and secondary education, and some for higher education. The classification consists of the rotation model, the flex model, the self-blending model and the enriched virtual model. The rotation model is of the most interest for the possible incorporation in primary or secondary classrooms as it entails online activities as an added step to the otherwise traditional learning environment where both the class and the instructor are present. The added online element can include anything from accessing online materials to communicating with other students or teachers online (Friesen, 2012, p. 7). The advantage of this particular model is that it is relatively easy to incorporate it in EFL classrooms with limited resources. The focus is not primarily on virtual learning, as with the enriched model, and it is also not required that students are engaged either primarily or individually online, as is the case with the flex model and self-enriched model. The rotation model can further be divided into station rotation, lab rotation, flipped classroom and individual rotation (Watson et al., 2015, p. 7). Out of the four classification types, flipped classroom provides the most possibilities for institutions with limited resources as it relies completely on the resources that students already have. In other words, the materials and instructions are posted for them online and they are able to access them in their own time from their homes, and then come to classes prepared for further activities, practice and testing. It is also interesting to note that the enriched virtual model often develops out of courses originally created to be taken fully online (Watson et al., 2015, p. 7).

Face-to-face driver model, one of the two classification models originally included by Staker and Horn (2011), is equally suitable for EFL classrooms with limited resources. This model essentially allows the teacher to enhance the lecture and instructions with technological means. In other words, this model takes into account the fact that, most of the time, the number of devices and programs necessary for all the students to be engaged online, as well as other expenses including training, additional equipment, wear and tear, electricity etc., are too much for most classrooms. On the other hand, taking advantage of the existing resources to simply advance the usual face-to-face teaching can be accomplished in most classrooms, including those with limited resources. The difference between this model and flipped classroom submodel is that with the face-to-face model, the materials and instructions do not necessarily have to be available online. With this model any sort of inclusion of ICT is welcomed and technology is used to the extent that the available resources allow.

Implementation of blended learning in EFL classrooms - Advantages and disadvantages

In order to make the time, effort, and money necessary for the implementation of blended learning in EFL classrooms worth it, the advantages of the said learning should be

substantial and plentiful. According to the existing research and current trends that truly is the case. Firstly, regarding the mentioned resources, blended learning seems to offer short-term and long-term means of saving. Copying and printing of various materials represent an immediate cut of expenses (Gould, 2003, p. 55), and the ability to utilize the existing resources to the maximum and save on direct instructional expenses is also an important element that should be taken into consideration (Dziuban et al., 2004). Apart from that, the overall advantages in terms of the increased attendance rates (Riffell et al., 2004), improved test results (O'Toole & Absalom, 2003; Dowling et al., 2003), and an improved sense of community (Rovai & Jordan, 2004) combined with opportunities for deep learning (Garrison & Kanuta, 2004), are all severely important elements that should also be taken into consideration when debating whether to implement the blended learning or not.

Additionally, previously mentioned rotation and face-to-face driver models allow teachers to utilize blended learning to the extent that the resources and other constraints allow them. Therefore, even when the minimal level of the necessary IT literacy of the students and staff, and/or the technical support (Alexander, 2010) is taken into account, there is still room for the incorporation of blended learning. For example, not every EFL classroom or school has the same resources, some own no computers, some have one or just a few computers that everyone shares, and some have full computer rooms. Therefore, blended learning should be incorporated as much as the circumstances allow even if it implies the use of modified/mash up platforms as suggested in research by Petrovska and Salamovska (2017, p. 512). Their research was based on the use of E-platforms that are free of charge. They concluded that the benefits far outweigh the impediments of the implementation of such projects. Interestingly, the main challenges listed included technical/organizational problems and mindset shift (Petrovska & Salamovska, 2017, p. 513). Another important observation noted in several research studies is that blended learning provides better results than simply traditional or exclusively online learning. In fact, it has been suggested that retention is the highest when students are engaged in further online learning and practice following a traditional "lecture plus exercise" format (Bubas & Kermek, 2004, p. 6).

To fully utilize the resources at hand, the most important thing seems to be finding the right blend of traditional and online teaching (Kaleta et al., 2007, p. 21). This is where teachers and the rest of the staff must take the initiative and do quite a lot of work. In fact, Kaleta, Skibba and Joosten (2007) have gone over the most important tasks and roles that staff needs to fulfil and these include: re-examining course goals; developing online and face-to-face activities that are integrated and aligned with the goals; finding ways to assess students' understanding and mastery of the course material; and creating ways for students to interact. It is important to note that the incorporation of blended learning in EFL classrooms with limited resources goes along with the suggested ways of introducing ICT in classrooms and creates opportunities for future, more complete, ICT incorporation. In other words, the attitudes towards ICT use should be more open to partial solutions which allow small-scale testing of the various models. Correspondingly, Porter and Graham (2016) defined stages in the adoption of blended learning as: awareness and exploration, adoption and early implementation, and, finally, mature implementation and growth.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that the future of blended learning looks bright with some suggesting that by the end of the decade it will be difficult to find courses in higher

education that do not incorporate at least some web components within traditional instruction (Kim & Bonk, 2006). Others (Tucker, 2005) ascribe the existing, and possibly future, spread of blended learning to its long-term cost-effectiveness. In general, blended learning is a step towards the noted need for change in the future of education by 2030, as indicated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2017), and in Europe, the European Commission (EC) (2013, 2017) (Ossiannilsson, 2017, p. 16).

Ways of implementing blended learning in EFL classrooms with limited resources

One of the main ways in which blended learning can be introduced into EFL classrooms is through asynchronous activities that allow students to either use their own equipment at home, or device/s available at school, to complete the same activity at their own time and pace. In this way, even if a school owns a single computer available to students, for example, a computer in the school library, all students can complete the task at different times. These tasks can be as simple as accessing and/or downloading the materials, or watching a video, or as complex as posting comments to an online forum/classroom/website set up by the teacher, or completing surveys online etc. Such activities save up on certain resources (from paper to in-class time) and at the same time allow for the maximum utilization of the other available resources. This gives the teacher another tool to improve their lesson and expose students to even more authentic materials while also allowing them to take control of their own learning and be more proactive. Similarly, while the teacher provides the main structure, such as deadlines or schedules, students can participate when they find time or when they feel ready (Cleveland-Innes & Wilton, 2018, p. 54). Such a system can also be used by teachers to provide feedback that is highly necessary for the students, yet would take too much time to discuss in class or it would take other resources. For example, teachers can easily post comments/instructions/grades etc., and students can access them individually and/or ask additional questions. This could also increase participation of those who are otherwise more hesitant to interact and pose questions while in groups.

Certain activities which can be completed only online can also be incorporated in classrooms, either as complete activities that users can do individually on the available computers or later at home, or partially through materials created online and brought into classroom or adapted for traditional face-to-face use. Usually, having just one computer is enough to incorporate several modified activities such as Dictionary Race or even the use of a Virtual Learning Environment platform (Stanley, 2013, pp. 17-18).

There are many activities that can be accomplished with the use of a single computer and if teachers have access to OHP or other projectors, so many new possibilities are at their fingertips. In fact, teachers can be the ones controlling the actions such as typing in the answers, clicking on choices etc., but students as a group and/or individuals can be asked to provide instructions. Even in classrooms without computers and laptops, teachers can rely on smartphones. Today, most students own smartphones and there are many educational apps and websites offering their services for free. Therefore, students can be instructed to download some of these apps or access the websites and blended learning can start in that way. If the internet connection is available, it opens up opportunities for numerous, both synchronous and asynchronous activities. For example, all students can be asked to complete the exact same test/survey or provide feedback or answers to a posed question. They can then do so on their

smartphones and teachers can check the results either by using a computer, if it is available, or their own phone. Some of the applications even support offline use or students can download the necessary materials beforehand. Sometimes, through the use of basic phone apps such as word editing software and Bluetooth technology students can be asked to write down short answers or do some work on their phones and then send it either to their peers for peer-reviews or to the teacher for grading or commenting. Such activities are followed by their own set of drawbacks such as possibility of cheating or technical issues, but even so they could be used as an additional tool to bring the materials and lessons closer to the students while the grading and the main work could be done in a traditional way. Banditvilai (2016), as cited in Ossiannilsson (2017, p. 28) noted that a blended learning model "could comprise several components, such as instructor-delivered content, e-learning, webinars, conference calls, live or online sessions with instructors, and other media and platforms, such as Facebook, e-mail, chat rooms, blogs, podcasting, Twitter, YouTube, Skype, and web boards".

The use of realia and authentic materials has been proven to be of help for students and, through the use of blended learning they can be exposed much more easily to such materials that would otherwise remain unused. For example, students can download newspapers or magazines, they can be shown news reports or tv programmes, etc. Therefore, such authentic materials can be of immense value for the development of certain skills such as speaking or writing (Bordonaro, 2018; Berardo, 2006).

Those EFL classrooms with extremely limited resources, or almost no resources, can also engage in blended learning with some other tools. For example, eTwinning can be used as students can use their own devices but the learning can still be mediated and controlled by teachers online. This allows for further benefits compared to the traditional learning as students can actually engage with native speakers and/or other English language learners and, by doing that, they can also learn about other cultures. An example of such a project is a "Telling Lives" eTwinning project in which students from Norway and Finland exchanged digital stories over a shared online platform (Lundby, 2009, p. 22). In fact, while it might seem that online or blended learning may lead to alienation of students, a study by Rovai and Jordan (2004) indicated that blended learning seems to develop a stronger sense of community. Furthermore, in terms of practical application of blended learning, there are many projects which have shown that incorporating blended learning in a variety of models and ways, from rotation models to simple complementation of traditional teaching, is achievable (Lim & Wang, 2016, p. 78).

Conclusion

With such irrefutable evidence in favour of positive effects of blended learning, such as the long-term cost saving effects, positive impact on retention rates, class attendance, learner autonomy etc., it is no wonder that the future of blended learning seems brighter than ever. Additionally, there are several external factors that significantly contribute to the further development and the expected spread of blended learning. In other words, with the combination of all the positive effects of blended learning and the increased incorporation of ICT, as well as the calls for education reform on a larger scale, we can only expect that blended learning will continue to flourish. As the road to the complete incorporation and development of full blended learning models is quite complex and demanding, small steps should be taken as soon as possible. Therefore, educators should strive to incorporate blended learning even in

classrooms with limited resources as there are many ways for them to do so relatively easily. This paper offered some of them and pointed out positive outcomes of such teaching. By learning more about blended learning and working towards its inclusion in classrooms with limited resources, educators are simply following the natural steps in the process of moving from a completely traditional, face-to-face teaching, to the more modern, technologically advanced teaching.

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PRIMJENA KOMBINOVANOG UČENJA
U UČIONICAMA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA S OGRANIČENIM SREDSTVIMA

Sažetak

Često se priznaje značaj upotrebe informacijsko komunikacijske tehnologije u obrazovanju, kao i značaj svih prednosti koje ona donosi. Ipak, uprkos brojnim prednostima korištenja ove

tehnologije, od razvoja kritičkih vještina razmišljanja do stvaranja okruženja usmjerenih ka učeniku, postoje i određene mane koje ona nosi. Jedan od glavnih nedostataka korištenja informacijsko komunikacijske tehnologije u obrazovanju jeste nedostatak sredstava. Mnoge obrazovne institucije i pojedinci, kako učitelji tako i učenici, bore se sa nedostatkom ili manjkom sredstava u smislu broja ili vrste dostupnih uređaja, potrebnih programa, tehničke podrške i obuke. U takvim slučajevima, kombinovano učenje predstavlja najbolji način prevazilaženja tih prepreka i razlike između tradicionalnog i kompjuterskog podučavanja. U osnovi, kombinovano učenje objedinjuje tradicionalno učenje sa online pristupom čime se poboljšavaju procesi učenja i podučavanja. Stoga, ovaj rad će staviti naglasak na moguće načine implementacije kombinovanog učenja u učionicama engleskog jezika s limitiranim sredstvima kako bi se na taj način učenicima ponudili svi potrebni i relevantni online materijali koji bi inače ostali neiskorišteni.

Ključne riječi: kombinovano učenje, ICT, sredstva, učenje, implementacija.