

Students' Assessment of Blended Learning in an English Language Instruction Course at the University of Cuenca¹

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Abstract: The research aimed to assess students' appreciation of blended learning in a fourth-level English language instruction course at the University of Cuenca. The experiment was conducted in 2011 during the spring semester, and a total of 58 students participated. For the class, a mix of classical teaching using a textbook and instruction via internet using the Moodle software were used in harmony. The impressions and experiences of the students were gathered via a questionnaire and an interview; and analysed through Excel. The students liked the blended approach, were motivated to practice and communicate, learned better and more effectively, and considerably improved their English language skills. Initially, introducing the blended approach meant an additional burden for the lecturer, but, in the end, it considerably facilitated the teaching process. The experiment revealed that the university has to enhance its technological platform to make the modular, internet-based sections of the course function smoothly.

Keywords: *blended learning, English language course, Moodle, textbook, evaluation.*

1. Introduction

The learning process has been seen and thought of as a complex endeavor to be achieved. A common concept of learning is that it is accomplished by one person, the lecturer, and that it all happens in the classroom (Williams & Burden, 1997). This approach is typical of the teaching process at the University of Cuenca, more specifically, the way English as a foreign language is taught at the Language Institute of the University of Cuenca. The main elements of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) are repetition and memorization of grammar. Another drawback is the lack of implementation of new teaching approaches that enhance the learning process. Given that teaching is focused on grammar means that little attention is paid to the development of communicative competence and linguistic skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Class communication among students and between student and teacher is very limited, and teaching is mostly a teacher-centered process; consequently, students do not reach the language learning objectives. As stated by Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Mellow (2000),

¹ This study is an extended version of the paper presented in The Self in Language Learning Conference (SiLL) 2015.

learning a language implies applying different methodologies and, above all, making students the main actors of the process and reducing the lecturer's role as the class coach.

Recently in literature a lot of emphasis has been given to methodologies that enhance the process of learning a foreign language. Lightbown & Spada (2013) discussed in their book *How Languages are Learned* the behavioral, nativist, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives that culminate in better teaching and learning of a second and/or foreign language in formal education. According to Rice & Smith (2010), research conducted on how people learn effectively resulted in the development of various models, which, when properly used, provide experiences in effective learning in formal and informal settings. In particular, technological resources have opened new horizons in education, particularly in audiovisual material such as podcasts and screen casts, which address different learning strategies and styles. Most important, they all emphasize active student participation. During the last decade, web-based applications that enable the production of modular internet-based courses to support current social constructionist pedagogy became available. Most of those applications, such as the Moodle platform, are easily accessible. The Moodle platform is defined as a Course Management System (CMS), also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It is a free web application that educators can use to create an effective online learning site. For example, the Moodle platform can provide students with more options for developing linguistic skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It enables students to optimally communicate among themselves and with the lecturer. According to Rice & Smith (2010), Moodle bases its philosophy on social constructionist pedagogy (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), enabling students to acquire new knowledge while interacting with different activities and different students. Also, as students are asked to construct their own learning experiences, the odds of learning increase. For example, you might read this page several times and still forget it by tomorrow. However, if you try to explain these ideas to someone else in your own words or produce a slideshow that explains these concepts, then you likely would have a better understanding that is integrated in your thinking. This is why people take notes during lectures (even if they never read the notes again). Implementing a blended approach, a term increasingly used to describe the way e-learning is combined with traditional classroom methods (Thorne, 2003), has greatly contributed to successful learning experiences throughout the world, and it has been proven through extensive research. Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer (2005) refer to blended learning as the purposeful arrangement of media, methods, and ways of organizing learning situations through combining traditional media and methods of e-learning elements and possibilities.

As a matter of fact, North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia have made blended learning (also called B-learning) part of their curricula, promoting learning in an innovative way. Today higher education is characterized by increasing adoption and integration of e-technologies to foster learning (Chan, A.Y.K., Chow, K.O. & Jia, W., 2003). Moreover, research has proven that Content Management Systems (CMSs) such as Blackboard, WebCT, and Moodle are among the leading web-based technologies used to facilitate the design and delivery of e-course events (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland 2005).

The main purpose of this study was to assess students' perception and experience with respect to using a blended-learning approach in a 4th level English as a foreign language course, in which a Moodle-based virtual environment was used alongside classical classroom teaching and discussion at the Language Institute of the University of Cuenca.

2. Methodology

2.1. Instruments

A questionnaire and an interview were used to assess the students' perception of blended learning. In both evaluation methods, participants selected one of the preset answers to answer the questions, allowing me to quantify the respondents' qualitative impressions. The questionnaire contained the following questions: classic teaching using a mix of textbook and interactive sessions via Moodle is complementary (Q1); the virtual platform Moodle facilitates (Q2) or hinders (Q3) the learning of English as foreign language; the platform permits the students to adjust the learning process to their personal rhythm (Q4); the course content via the platform can be more easily and regularly updated (Q5); the textbook offers sufficient up-to-date content to learn English as foreign language (Q6); working with the platform gives the student more confidence in actively using English (Q7); the platform improves vocabulary knowledge (Q8); the platform encourages learning (Q9); the textbook provides sufficient opportunities to assimilate the English language (Q10); do you feel more confident using a textbook than the Moodle platform (Q11); a textbook is limiting and hinders the learning process since it is less dynamic and interactive (Q12); and do you prefer the classical way of teaching rather than the mix of classical teaching accompanied by internet-based modules (Q13). The participants could provide one of the following answers to each of those questions: agree, partially agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and I have no opinion.

The questions asked during the interview were: what do you think about the platform (Q14); which approach did you like most, textbook or Moodle (Q15); and, if you could choose any of the following options (talk and chalk or blended learning) to learn English, which one would you choose (Q16). The students could answer question Q14 as excellent, good, moderate, or poor and answer questions Q15 and Q16 as the platform, textbook, or both.

2.2. Data collection analysis

The responses to the questions yielded respectively quantitative and qualitative information, which was checked for accuracy, digitized, and stored in an EXCEL-sheet. The data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, including frequency and percentage response distribution, measures of central tendency, and dispersion measures, which describe how closely the values or responses are to central tendencies. Graphs were constructed using Grapher™ v11.

2.3. Participants

The data was collected from students attending a 2011 spring semester 4th level English foreign language course. The students had received English instruction in the classical way in the 1st to the 3rd level. The dominant teaching pedagogy in those years was "chalk and talk," which does not stimulate active student participation. In the 4th level, as a pilot project at the University of Cuenca, the blended mode of learning was implemented by combining the classical way of teaching using a textbook with sections offered interactively via the Moodle platform, enabling

students to be more active and to choose the time that best suited them. The questionnaire and interview were conducted at the end of the spring semester.

2.3.1. Sample population

The number of students who participated in the experiment was 58, split between an afternoon and evening class. In the afternoon class there were 28 participants and in the evening class there were 30 participants.

3. Results and Discussion

The students' responses to the questionnaire, depicting their perception of receiving sections of the course material in an interactive way using the Moodle platform, are summarized in Figure 1. The consensus of the responses varies from question to question. For example, 66% of the students found using the Moodle platform as a complement to the classical class sections instructive (Q1); however, 32% partially agreed and 2% disagreed. Furthermore, 98% of the students stated that using a textbook alongside virtual learning via the Moodle platform enhances the learning process (Q2): respectively, 68% strongly agreed, 30% agreed, and 2% did not answer. On the contrarily formulated question given to check their logic, the students provided almost the same response: 68% strongly disagreed that blended learning hinders the learning process, 15% disagreed, 2% strongly agreed, and 15% did not have an opinion.

The students appreciated the flexibility the Moodle platform provides (Q4); 81% strongly agreed and 12% agreed that they appreciated the possibility that they could dedicate time and energy to learning the course sections via the virtual platform when they had time and interest. Only 7% of the surveyed students were less enthusiastic and preferred a more authoritatively imposed study schedule. A similarly positive response was given to question (Q5), i.e., whether the platform provides more up-to-date and advanced study material; respectively, 73% of the students responded very enthusiastically, and 27% were very satisfied by the actualization of the course content, which is impossible when textbooks are used. As to the question of whether they find that a textbook as instruction material is adequate and sufficient to learn English (Q6), amazingly 19% and 34% of the students respectively agree and partially agree, 32% disagree, and only 15% strongly disagree.

Students have less faith that working with the virtual platform provides the same level of learning compared to the classical way of learning (Q7)— 86% agree with this statement (40% agree and 46% partially agree), while only 12% have a different opinion. With respect to the question whether the Moodle platform enhances vocabulary learning (Q8), 61% of the respondents strongly agree and 34% agree. A great percentage of the students believe that blended learning, whereby sections of the course material can be studied via the Moodle platform, encourages learning the English language (Q9)—54% agree and 34% disagree, while 9% did not have an opinion on this issue. This is also confirmed by the response to (Q10) as to whether the correct and intensive use of a textbook provides the same knowledge as learning whereby a given fraction of the lecturing material is being taught via internet—25% of the students agree with this statement and 46% partially agree, while 15% disagree and 14% strongly

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disagree. So nearly 30% of the students are convinced that blended learning is an advantage with respect to classical teaching. In addition, 24% of the students agree with the statement that a virtual platform provides less a sentiment of safety than using a handbook (Q11), although 73% of the students disagreed. In line with this (Q12), 64% respectively 25% and 39%, agree and partially agree that the Moodle platform provides better quality and training in spoken English; only 34% disagree or strongly disagree. As to the final question (Q13), whether they prefer teaching in the classical way (“talk and chalk”) to blended teaching, almost all students disagree (19% disagree and 68% strongly disagree).

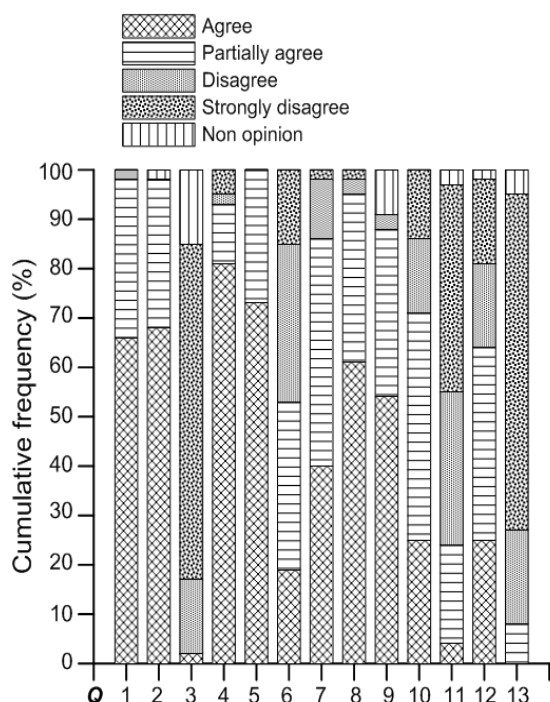


Fig. 1: Cumulative frequency of the 4th level students' response to questions 1 to 13 in the questionnaire.

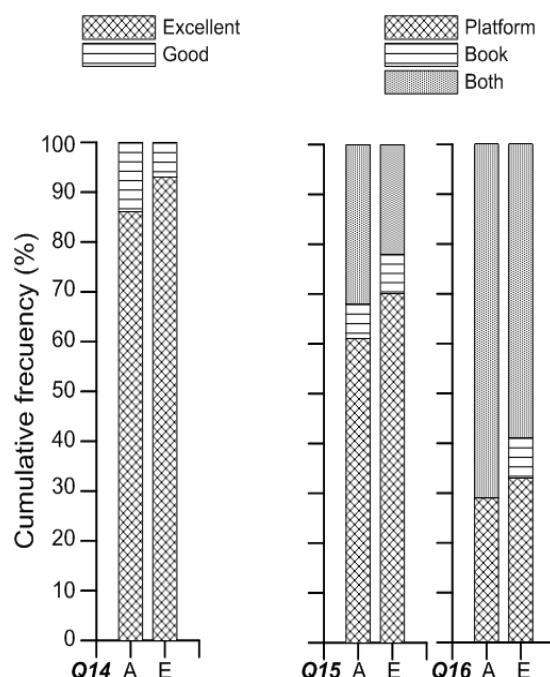


Fig. 2: Cumulative frequency of the 4th level students' response to questions Q14, Q15 and Q16 asked in the interview during the afternoon (A) and evening (E) class session.

With respect to the question “What do you think about the platform?” (Q14), asked of all afternoon and evening students during the interview, overwhelming they stated that blended teaching—integrating the classical way of teaching with the possibility to learn some of the lecture material via internet—is very much appreciated. The responses of the afternoon class and the evening class do not differ much, since in the afternoon session 86% of the students find blended teaching excellent, whereas in the evening this percentage was 93%. Responses to questions Q15 and Q16 are very much in line with expectations, given that question Q16 formulates the opposite of Q15, i.e., which approach (platform, or textbook, or a mixture of both) do you like most, or if you could choose any of the options to learn English (platform, textbook, or both), which one would you select. The majority of students in the evening session (70%) are convinced that studying via the Moodle platform is most effective and efficient, while only 61%

of the students in the afternoon session are of the same opinion. Whereas 22% (evening session) to 32% (afternoon session) of the students find that blended teaching might be an excellent way of teaching (Q15), 59% (evening session) and 71% (afternoon session) state that blended teaching should be the way a 4th level English language course is taught. Since those percentages do not correspond, it illustrates that the students analyzed and answered question per question without comparing questions. The survey shows that, although the students are not very familiar with blended teaching and learning, they are open to a teaching approach where they take more responsibility and are more active in the learning process. It is up to them to study the course sections on the internet provided via the Moodle platform.

Although the results of this study are based on a single semester experimental trial with 58 students in the 4th level course of English as a foreign language, the majority of the students seem to be very pleased with the mixture of classical learning in a classroom and the possibility to learn certain class modules, developed using Moodle software, via internet. As this study as well as others show (Kessler, 2010; Kessler & Bikowski, 2010; Roed, 2003; Wold, 2011), blended learning has many advantages over traditional classroom teaching and learning: providing learners motivation, autonomy, flexibility, and immediate and detailed feedback; reducing anxiety; and enhancing student involvement and participation.

Although a minority of students seems to prefer the use of textbooks and a classical class setting rather than a blended approach, the survey did not provide the reasons for the a-motivation of the students. Most likely their attitude is the result of a teacher failing to provide them with the support they needed to work with this new way of learning. Other reasons may be that the computer infrastructure in classrooms is deficient, or that students at home do not possess the internet infrastructure they need to work in the evenings or weekends on their English as a foreign language course. It is evident that the introduction of blended learning requires that lecturers and students mentally adapt to this new learning approach and environment (Purvis, Aspden, Bannister, & Helm, 2011).

4. Conclusions

Whereas the results of the research might be very promising and in favor of B-learning, the primary limitation of the research is that it was carried out within the singular context of learning a foreign language. Further research undertaken in a similar context and employing a more elaborate research design is desirable to test the external validity of the current findings. This research should include three key points. First, the current study needs to be replicated with a larger matched sample during several semesters, and motivated and a-motivated students should be followed and interviewed about their perceptions. The interview of a-motivated students may reveal the shortcomings of the B-learning approach. Second, more emphasis in the performance assessment should be given to student abilities in reading, speaking, and writing English, not just the collection of their impressions. To accurately define the advantage of B-learning over classical learning, it may be appropriate to compare over time two groups of students—a group learning English in the classical way and a group learning English in a blended system—and to measure the English proficiency of both groups. Third, to clearly understand how a student's attitude with respect to blended learning evolves, the analysis should focus on person-centered longitudinal analyses.

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To enhance the success of implementing blended learning at the University of Cuenca on a larger scale, the lecturer's a-interest in the use of technological resources must be overcome, which likely can only be achieved by providing teacher training in Moodle software and similar technological tools. Lecturers and students need to improve their computer skills to fully benefit from the many possibilities available through the Moodle platform. Additionally, it is important to explain to teachers how to set up their classes to fully benefit from the blended approach. Moreover, the university should upgrade its ICT infrastructure, install appropriate computer and projection infrastructure in the classrooms, and facilitate user, lecturer, and student access to the infrastructure and the software applications. Training teachers, providing appropriate infrastructure, and simplifying bureaucracy are still major obstacles hindering the introduction of blended learning and its widespread application.

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