FROM BLENDED TO ONLINE CLASSROOMS: TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyse differences in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, to compare the two methods that are applied to the same groups of adult students. The online and blended delivery methods are described, as we focus on past experiences due to the forced lockdown brought by the 2020 pandemic. Findings show that there is a significant difference in teaching methods and final assessment methods, so that the learning outcome should not be affected, and that the learner should have access to the same amount of information and the learning outcome should be as qualitative in the online class as in the blended-learning process. The article also discussesthe advantages and disadvantages of offering language courses online versus in a blended format from instructors' and students' perspective.
Keywords: Blended learning, online learning, online teaching

Introduction

Face-to-face language lessons, blended courses and online courses offer students the opportunity to observe language in context, to understand how to use that language and to apply it in meaningful ways in appropriate contexts. For more than two decades, network and communication technologies have completely changed the way instruction is delivered to students who cannot easily attend face-to-face lessons. even in less developed areas. Learning solutions have been presented in order to meet the needs of instructors and students. However, the first part of the year 2020 has been defined by the pandemic that threatened the whole world and has forced a large part of the world's population to quickly move from the face-to-face lessons or the blended format to online or e-education. Most recent studies compared face-to-face education to blended learning, but fewer studies compared blended learning to online learning, where there is no face-to-face interaction and technology acts as the new

environment for warm-ups, presentations, checking understandings, collaborative tasks, checking assignments and last but not least, assessments. The most recent modalities used to blend traditional face-to-face education with technology have proven that learners were more satisfied as their learning levels improved. Numerous studies recorded the positive effect of blended learning both for instructors and learners. Fewer studies have compared online and blended learning methods that examine differences in learning outcomes or explored mediating mechanisms that may influence learning. The present article aims to identify how the two delivery formats are different as far learners and instructors are concerned especially since the 2020 health crisis has forced numerous educational systems to go online and 'to fly the plane as it was being built' due to the fact that numerous teachers and instructors do not have previous online resources or knowledge about how to use online platforms, create and manage online classrooms and deal with the tremendous amount of work that implies preparing online content, deliver online presentations, assigning meaningful tasks and obviously correcting homework and offering feedback to hundreds of students.

Blended learning

In its early stages, blended learning referred to a mix of classroom interactions and online learning. At present, it has developed a larger meaning implying various learning methods combined with an appropriate use of technology, the focus being on the context where the learner uses the acquired knowledge, either online or offline (face-to-face). Nevertheless, we cannot speak of a single definition for the concept of blended learning, especially because it is more than a concept: it is an on-going process that develops with every teacher or trainer who applies it, with every student or learner who joins the process and with every contextual situation that learners use to use the acquired knowledge (in our case, a foreign language) in a specific situation, regardless of the way this situation is created. Blended learning is not usually studied with blended teaching methods, due to the fact that it is a hybrid, integrative, multi-method learning concentrating mainly on the student without taking into consideration instructors' efforts to create a learning environment. The focus is on students' outcomes and on their satisfaction as teachers or instructors put a lot of effort into keeping their presence at a minimum level. The blended learning approach has transformed the traditional face-

to-face classroom interaction into a social on-line interaction focusing mainly on students and less on technology itself or on the instructor.

The three models used in blended learning, that is, the supplemental model, the replacement model and the emporium model, that have also been applied to face-to-face interactions. Firstly, the supplemental model was developed in the 1970s in the U.S.A. to use technology in the improvement of student retention. It is based on the structure of traditional courses and uses technology resources to supplement traditional lectures and textbooks for students who cannot attend lectures due to a number of outside factors such as health issue, transportation issues or even financial issue. According to an overwhelming amount of studies "students participating in SI within the targeted high-risk courses earn higher mean final course grades than students who do not participate in SI" which also happens in groups that are more likely to drop out of school. "Students participating in SI persist at the institution (reenroll and graduate) at higher rates than students who do not participate in SI" (Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky Cowley 2014: 610). Although technology is incorporated, it does not change the structure of the course. Students work online and receive their study materials online. However, students meet their teachers as often as in the traditional course, due to the fact that the face-to-face meetings are still the basis of the supplemental model. Secondly, the replacement model replaces some of the face-to-face classroom meetings with online, interactive activities. Students witness significant changes during the face-to-face meetings: online resources are integrated in the learning experience, as online communication is encouraged. There are also online resources to be studies, as the time spent in the classroom is dedicated to interactive and collaborative activities. substitutes online content and activities for portions of in-class class time and reduce face-to-face class time. The replacement model also changes the way that the face-to-face class time is structured: class time is dedicated more to interactive activities and peer-to-peer or student-to-instructor collaboration that cannot be conducted as easily online. The replacement model is the most promoted due to the fact that it reduces the time spent in class and it increases the time spent in interactive activities and online collaboration. Moreover, delivering lessons online is the perfect way to save time, especially if they are also available for students to review them every time they find it necessary. Thirdly, the emporium model renounces to all face-to-face meetings, which are replaced with learning platforms or learning portals. The platforms offer access to online materials, counseling, and support. The

traditional lectures are no longer available, and communication relies completely on Internet connections. "The math emporium model was first developed by Virginia Tech in 1999. In the emporium model students use computer-based learning resources, engage in active learning, and work toward mastery of concepts" (Wilder and Berry 2016:53). As we know 'emporium' comes from Greek, 'emporion, emporos', originally meaning 'merchant', from 'poros', which means 'a journey'. In English, it is a "large and often ostentatious retail shop offering for sale a wide variety of merchandise" https://www.thefreedictionary.com/emporium. From this meanings of a large variety of merchandise, the Math Emporium model was created to offer "an abundance of memory laden computers, powerful operating systems, and the latest software packages. its strength is embedded in the power of its unique, diverse, and competent tutoring staff. The tutoring staff consists of professors, instructors, graduate students, and undergraduates" (Peter 2014:7)

Online teaching and learning versus blended learning

As far as online learning is concerned, it is close to the emporium model of blended learning, which also renounced to most of face-to-face interactions, being based on technology and all the advantages (and disadvantages) that come with technological development.

While technology has mainly a supporting role in two models of blended learning, it is more than a medium for the emporium model and online learning. In fact, it is the basis of education in times of crisis and helps facilitate the learning experience. The main benefit of online learning is that can take place anywhere and anytime as long as there is a communication device and an internet connection. Most online teachers and instructors allow the students to set their own pace and to select their learning time. In case there are students who participate from various countries and different time zones, it is a good idea to set the time so that they do not have to attend online classes early in the morning or late at night. Thus, online becomes the synonym of everywhere and anywhere. However, it puts all the participants in the same 'melting pot', without considering particular learning styles. Yet, the opportunity that students should take is to spend more time on unfamiliar content, so they review digital materials and send questions directly to the teacher who can address specific difficult issues and thus, help the weaker students keep up with the rest of the group.

Unlike online learning, blended learning supports different learning styles. Thus, blended learning takes place either online or face-to-face or in a certain created environment that takes into consideration different learning styles and preferences, so that students can choose their preferred learning channel.

A second difference that can be traced between the two models is about the amount of interaction with peers. There are a number of platforms that offer the possibility to separate students into breakout rooms which is an extremely useful feature. Thus, peer-to-peer collaboration and discussions can take place on a digital facilitation platform so that participants may have a sense of belonging to a group in order to encourage "the development of shared feelings and emotions between learners and instructors and among learners (Lim, Morris, Kupritz 2004). Fontaine (2002:24) considers that "delivering vivid learning experiences to online learners requires creating a sense of presence, a feeling of immediacy, and a broad awareness of the real and vivid learning environment". The breakout rooms solve one of the main problems of online teaching and learning, that is, the creation of an environment that resembles the face-to-face environment and provides that sense of belonging to a community that shares the same information and the same level when using a foreign language. Offering a context, especially in mixed classroom is an essential factor because the lack of context leads to a sense of uselessness.

Thirdly, online learning is more flexible and more cost-effective than blended learning. The fact that lectures, interactions, assignments, and tests are all enabled by virtual platforms seems to be very relaxing for students who hide behind a turned-off camera and a microphone. However, for teachers and instructors, the amount of work has increased enormously since immediate feedback is required. Students have access to their instructors not only via email but also via instant messages sent for example in google classrooms. Their questions can also be discussed with peers on discussion boards. Online assignments, tests and quizzes can be constructed with or without automatic marks, which also provides instant feedback. However, we have to bear in mind the fact that assignments and tests are not created by platforms, instead they require hours of extra work for the teacher or instructor who also has to build extra tasks for weaker students who need extra practice on certain issues. It is crucial that students benefit from immediate and continual feedback throughout the learning process in order to understand more difficult concepts, as well as to correct mistakes in real time, as it would happen in face-to-face interaction, even if it implies more work from the teacher/ instructor.

Doo Hun Lim, Michael L. Morris and Virginia W. Kupritz (2007:35) consider that some strategies to "satisfy learners' sense of presence and belonging during online or blended learning include(a) providing immediate feedback on learners' questions and timely technical support; (b) asking short questions checking the understanding of major learning content at frequent intervals during instruction; (c) sending learners' learning progress report on a regular base to promote learners' motivation for learning achievement; and (d) using humor so the learners feel emotionally refreshed and engaged".

I would also add two more strategies useful to offer students a sense of belonging, purpose and meaningfulness: (a) creating specific tasks for students who have difficulties in keeping up with the group, tasks that address specific needs and skills; and (b) providing numerous opportunities for students to speak not only to the teacher/ instructor but also to their peers (especially for online classes) either by having them deliver short presentations on specific topics and having their colleagues ask questions or using the breakout rooms, in case this facility can be accessed on the platforms used by the teachers/ instructors. As Palloff and Pratt noticed (2013:39), "Collaborative learning processes help students achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning making. In addition, collaborative activity can help to reduce the feeling s of isolation that can occur when students are working at a distance".

Moreover, it is vital to develop learning goals, starting with them when beginning the teaching process. The key concepts and the skills that students need to develop are the starting point in designing any face to face course or a blended or online course. The learning goals are also the starting point in choosing the appropriate technology that students are able to use. For example, video-conferencing facilities are not enough for students who need to develop writing skills.

Organizing online course content in teaching a foreign language is another essential step towards an effective learning process. Apart from providing clear instructions along with the material that needs to be studied (and, I must add, checking twice that instructions are clearly understood), posting due dates for assignments is another step in structuring a course due to the fact that not all students can be actively involved in an online lesson (especially for larger groups) due to technological difficulties -some may have a poor internet connection, others may lack a camera or a microphone.

The teacher/ instructor has to maintain a balanced level of participation and communication, so that students feel that they are available and committed. "This includes modeling good participation by frequently contributing to discussions through responding to students' posts and asking further questions. The instructor is instrumental for creating a warm and inviting atmosphere that promotes an online sense of community" (Garrison, Vaughan 2008). This can be done not necessarily by converting print materials for the online lesson but rather by examining different kinds of content sources and media formats that are more likely to suit various learning styles and, at the same time, to function as an incentive for learners. In addition, when selecting the right media for a lesson the teacher/ instructor must have in mind not only the learning goals but also the effect they have on all learners the learner (for example, access to technology, download time, any disabilities that students might have). Thus, sometimes, transcripts to a lesson may be necessary.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both blended and online learning have plenty of advantages as they both focus on developing virtual learning communities. The 2020 health crisis forced a large number of teachers and students into the online classroom, without previous online resources or knowledge about how to use online platforms, create and manage online classrooms and deal with the tremendous amount of work that implies preparing online content, deliver online presentations, assigning meaningful tasks and offering feedback to hundreds of students.

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