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TEACHING ESP IN A BLENDED LEARNING SETTING

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Abstract
This paper presents the pros and cons for an ESP blended learning experience. The targeted course is offered to intermediate level language learners who never had any previous experience with digital learning. The paper describes the syllabus amendment and implementation process by focusing on aligning the blended components to the course skill-based goals and outcomes and the IT tools necessary for task completion. The analysis of self-authored e-tasks and the description of appropriate tool functions offer several tips for future performance improvement.

Key Words: ESP, Blended learning environments, self-authored e-materials, effective online teaching.

FOCUS AND PURPOSE

This paper describes the syllabus amendment and implementation process by focusing on aligning the blended components to the course skill-based goals and outcomes and the IT tools necessary for task completion. The paper references on-line language learning models and issues raised by technology integration practitioners. The main influences described here on the course method, topics and approaches are Uschi Felix's (2003) "Pedagogy on the line: identifying and closing the missing links" and Teaching Writing On-line by Scott Warnock (2009). The reflections and recommendations on the online content, tools, task scaffolding and assessment practices are coming out of my experience teaching a skill enhancement course to undergraduate learners in the Spring of 2010. The data consisted of course assignments, learner responses, University e-learning unit records, and teacher reflection sheets. Based on conclusions drawn from this experience, the paper gives a list of weaknesses, strengths, and recommendations. A description of the course, a sample two-week course calendar, and a detailed sample scaffolding procedure are also provided for the benefit of on-line practitioners in second language training programs.

RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

The idea for this experimental course implementation came as a result of an increasing percentage of job announcements, in local mass media, print and electronic, which describe a successful candidate as having a good command in English language skills and word processing skills. Another factor was the awareness that English language training centers in Palestinian tertiary institutions suffer from large student numbers, thus making it impossible to provide individual attention to each student who needs remedial assistance. Also, the job market locally, regionally and globally has become very demanding, which makes it difficult for students to compete in an increasingly global job market. Palestinian students, like many students in other countries, recognize the importance of English for personal, professional, institutional and ultimately national development. They have a strong desire to take advantage of local and international training opportunities; to access information in their professional and technical fields; to reach out to international markets or professional counterparts abroad; to interact with foreign consultants, donors, and visitors; and to make active use of international computer networks and electronic mailing systems. Such realities have put mounting pressures on language teachers to think of alternative teaching practices that are more learner-centered and likely to meet learners' needs. The availability of technology both on campuses and at homes and the great potentials of e-learning environments make blended learning one good option to explore.

Program potential applications

The following applications were used as functions for the online tasking. Many of them cannot be done in a face-to-face setting without wasting much of valuable class time.

1. Immediate access to relevant information in a face-to-face computer lab or real-time (synchronous) online session.
2. Access by the teacher to individual student screens in a lab session or in a synchronous online interaction provides wonderful opportunities for immediate teacher-to-student and student-to-student exchanges.
3. Access to templates anytime, anyplace (in asynchronous mode) gives greater opportunity for learning by modeling.
4. Using a variety of texts like chapters, images, advertising, newscasts, films, recordings, websites, e-links, and templates leads to a more active learning experience.
5. Completion of issues that could not be finished in the face-to-face classroom due to time and class size limitations.
6. The practice of models that were presented and discussed in a face-to-face setting.
7. Complementing but not replacing the currently teacher-oriented teaching methods.
8. Inclusion of assignments that motivate independent learning and creativity.
9. Working to improve learner writing skills through synchronous and asynchronous teacher and peer feedback.
10. Increasing the level of student motivation with the opportunity to learn by doing
11. Recording class presentations and uploading them for student assessment and feedback.
12. Expanding access to information for both the teacher and the students by adding online resources.
13. Using online ideas for higher level discussions in the face-face-sessions.
14. Adding materials for learners who want to do more or those who need more attention.
15. Sharing learner model responses.
16. Learner practice and rehearsal.

Needless to say, the list is not exhaustive. The more the teacher practices with these environments, the more applications will be added to this list. For a detailed description of the advantages and benefits of using technology in the language classroom, see pages 10-12 and 45-47 from Pete Sharma and Barney Barret's (2007) Blended Learning: Using Technology in and Beyond the Language Classroom.

ESP practices: Why an e-component

ESP courses are required by all students across campus at all universities as university or program requirements. Some colleges like medicine, business, and law design their own ESP courses. At most universities, these courses are taught by instructors from the English Language Center but are run by the respective faculties. None of the instructors are trained in the field of ESP (theory, methodology and practice). The teaching is lecture-based for the most part and the testing is often content-based.

Such a learning experience is demotivating to students and teachers alike. The teachers want to cover the assigned material on time. Most of the students are worried about preparation for unified testing. The university's e-learning infrastructure is very rarely utilized for the purposes of language training though in most campuses a learning management system is available. Any interested faculty member could use it for blended e-learning in any of his/her courses, and training in how to use the technology is available. Consultations are offered by IT personnel and MLS designers over the phone or in a pre-set one-on-one session. This being the reality, it makes every sense to explore newer teaching and learning methodologies.

E-learning realities in Palestinian higher education

Serious efforts towards the integration of technology in university education on a steady and stable basis started only recently in Palestine. Evidence from IT center records indicates that the beginning goes back to 1998/1999 with a United Nations Development Program sponsored project that aimed at designing educational e-courses to students of electrical and civil engineering. The teams encountered enormous difficulties in the beginning due to the lack of proper infrastructure at that time. Also, the instructors were not well trained;

technology-assisted learning was not the fashion at that time; and students did not welcome the idea because they could barely use email services.

The more schematic, coherent, and larger scope experiences were implemented in 2003 when committees were formed for e-learning integration, and centers and consultations services were made available for staff who wished to implement these newer methods in their classes. Universities developed their own on-line learning environments and learning management systems (LMS) called OCC1 (online course container) and more recently OCC2 (an authoring tool based on SCORM) .

Staff members who experimented with technology-assisted learning voiced two different views. The first view is satisfied with the university's existing infrastructure and the students' performance and on-line interaction. The source of their optimism is that the university has well-equipped computer labs, well-trained IT technicians, wireless internet covering all campus and enough servers to support on-line teaching, and user friendly tools .

The less optimistic opinion saw that the university continues to use Web 1.0 tools (e.g. LMS, OCC1, OCC2) which have become outdated and obsolete. For them, Web 1.0 tools are no more than posting the content of the educational material online. Students just go for information, and they rarely interact socially or academically. This opinion also mentions that technology should be used more often to cater to the needs of the huge number of students, that our students are digital natives, and that we need to immigrate to the digital world to fulfill their needs. For all these reasons, they thought the instructors should be trained on using Web 2.0 tools in teaching and learning such as Facebook, Twitter, Wikispace, etc. They also mentioned that most of the instructors are used to the traditional way of teaching, and they are comfortable with it. They are not ready yet to immigrate to the digital world (i.e., that of the students). There are digital gaps between them and the students; they are not willing to compromise their knowledge, and they are fortified by old practices. It was suggested that faculty members should be trained on the productive and active use of e-learning tools.

The challenges facing initial attempts at technology integration are mainly related to teacher technophobic feelings and the more comfortable no-technology educational spaces that they currently occupy.

SKILL ENHANCEMENT: A BLENDED LEARNING EXPERIMENT

The blended learning course described here aims at enhancing student capabilities in two ways: improving their skills so that they can become prepared for the job market, if they decide to enter it, and enabling them to pursue graduate study .

To these two ends, the course has a number of specific learning outcomes: letter writing, CV writing, application form completion, careful preparation for job interviews, writing of statement of purpose and proposal writing and presentation .

In addition, the course introduces the survival skills necessary for jobs and graduate study. These are critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making. To acquire these skills, students work on case-studies and are asked to apply these skills to solve problems .

The learners come from across disciplines, and so the language skills draw from a range of contexts.

In the amended version of the syllabus, writing and communication receive more emphasis than reading and listening, although the assigned tasks require reading and often class discussions are based on recorded and self authored e-materials. The writing assignments include summary of reports, report writing and proposal writing. The communication element trains on writing formal and informal communications, as well as doing presentations and interviews. As an example of the kind and sequencing of class activities, the learners would listen to a dialogue between a customer and a loan officer which will provide them with the context and the vocabulary; they then will be required to send an inquiry letter to a bank officer about that bank's loaning

procedure. They might be asked to collect information from bank brochures and websites and respond to a classmate's inquiries.

The amended course met in the computer lab with Internet access and a control unit that allows the teacher to access individual student screens for follow-up and feedback. The blended component utilized the potential applications listed under section 3 above. The learners did the tasks themselves, finding and utilizing information and writing their messages. The teacher offered both synchronous oral and written advice. To further encourage learners to work independently on building their own responses, the e-assignment tool was utilized and e-links to sources of information the learner had to visit, read, and incorporate in their writing were provided. The discussion tool was also used to further clarify and practice concepts, methods, models, and formatting styles that were discussed during the face-to-face meetings. The learners conversed by responding to each other's contributions, and the teacher carried to the face-to-face sessions the main controversies that emerged during these discussions. Peer-review was also done using the discussion tool .

The new method used to teach the course was very much learner centered, and for it to be successful it required high motivation on the part of the learners and a reasonably high level of language and skill proficiency. The course would not be taught using these methods with lower level and less independent learners. This is not to challenge the truth in the common wisdom that teachers can always experiment with and adjust their plans depending on the level of the learners they have. However, with on-line learning, the more ready the learner, the more independent learning tasks the teacher could assign.

Challenges

The challenges encountered over the semester related mainly to task preparation, task assessment, student learning habits, and the learning environments:

1. Lack of coherence in the course assignment. As a first experience the tasks sometimes were assigned without a clear purpose or a reasonable sequence.
2. Lack of full integration of e-tasks into the syllabus. Task description and deadlines were not prepared ahead of time and were not assigned time and weight from the beginning of the semester. As a result, the tasks seemed either an unimportant extra or a burden that required additional time and effort .
3. Learner readiness. Students are used to traditional texts and teachers' written feedback. It will take time to soften their attitudes and increase their trust in e-texts. Texts to them are printed material. Besides, low level learners always find the experience a seriously challenging one.
4. Assessment of learner performance. Department grading policy may not allow for non-traditional types of evaluation. The exam type of evaluation is certainly not the way to measure performance in a blended setting.
5. Space limitations. Classrooms are not well-equipped with teaching aids such as LCD, laptop, smart-boards, and the Internet connections which are badly needed to use for such a course. Computer labs are suitable for the functions of e-learning but there is a limited number of those labs.
6. Large classes. There is always the fear that with large classes e-learning experiences will add more burden to the teachers .
7. Teacher readiness. Some teachers are de-motivated to implement blended learning. Teachers may have a multi-section course, lack adequate knowledge in using modern technology appropriately, and may be untrained in designing blended learning .

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Knowledge-based concerns

These challenges tell me there are knowledge-base concerns that I need to keep an eye on during the design and implementation of e-materials and e-tasks in the future. These are:

1. Web 1 and web 2 environments
2. Activity scaffolding

3. Low proficiency learners
4. Assessment practices
5. Blended teaching for large classes
6. On-line feedback practices
7. Electronic links

Keep it simple

The systems of authoring made available through university websites are relatively simple since the instructor can use ready–made templates. The first plan of action is for the teacher to get the technical training needed in order to be able to understand, navigate in and use the LMS environment and all its functions in his or her respective institution.

The next step would be to learn to use blogs, e-groups, facebook, the exe e-learning html editor, etc. for learning and teaching - i.e., internet services or web-based technology that are available outside the LMS systems. As a first experience though, and in order to avoid any frustrations on the part of the teacher and learners, the teacher could start by utilizing the functions available through the LMS platforms which have plenty of learning opportunities for the learners.

Learner readiness

It is also important to consider issues that are related to learner readiness for on-line education：

1. Low level classes can be taught using blended learning as long as there is a frame provided by the trainer. It is in such contexts considered one step towards learner autonomy.
2. Student access to computers and to resources should be taken into consideration in the design of task scope .
3. Due to culture specific constraints, especially on female students, it might be better to use the managed environment provided by the university.
4. The discussion tool can be used to soften learner attitude during their first experience with technology assisted learning.

Large classes

There are no magic solutions to large classes and the experience with such classes might be discouraging. These tips might help improve teacher attitude and performance.

1. Split class into groups by using the e-group functions.
2. Carry online ideas to the face-to-face class.
3. On the discussion board, respond to the ones who have more problems.
4. Develop grading rubrics for e-assignments.
5. Develop self-assessment habits and provide learners with a checklist.

Assessment Practices

The objective is to have a blended component that is coherent, well-structured and can be assessed keeping in mind the large class size. To save my time and not to add to my load of work I relied on rubrics to assess the blended learning component (see appendix B for an example on the assessment rubric used to evaluate advertisement culture task under 4.6 below). Peer evaluation response also helped with the discussion tasks. One more time saving strategy I used was choosing the top two postings to grade. As a ground rule however the student effort on-line should count towards the course grade.

Traditional assessment schemes did not serve my purpose. The scheme I used for evaluation of the skill enhancement course looked like this:

Course assessment will include：
Homework assignments, participation and attendance 15%

OCC assignments and discussion summaries 20%
Mid-term Exam 20%
Interview & presentation skill 20%
Project progress report 10%
Project Proposal 20%

Activity scaffolding

Tasks and activities without enough orientation and scaffolding might end up demotivating and confusing to learners. When tasks do not provide necessary direction or are not specific enough and link to course material the likelihood is that learner hoped for exchange will not happen. The teacher may see a need to model for the learners especially when feedback is required from students. Rubrics also give enough direction.

Task 1 is an example on an e-activity that is not very well-scaffolded and that received low response from learners is:

Task 1: Write a letter to the dean of your college requesting a change in teaching methods. You may have to include a paragraph on why the change is necessary and in another paragraph or two to introduce the advantages of newer teaching methods like "the open classroom" and "the extended classroom". The tone of your opening and closing sentences are very important to the success or failure of your communication.

Although the task is very specific, the assignment was not supplemented by models of formal communication neither was there any e-sourcing that could offer the learners the needed orientation to the types of teaching methods mentioned in the assignment. There were problems in finding relevant material on education methods and the few exchanges on the discussion board revealed misunderstanding and confusion of the two methods mentioned in the task.

Task 2 is an example on a well-scaffolded activity:

Task 2: Use the e-sources below as sources of information on the culture of cigarette advertising in the 1970s. Use the information to build an informed response to the advertisement attached under file on the OCC. Your are expected to offer an explanation supported by example about the culture of the women audience targeted in the ad. More specifically, you want to explain the culture that is either created or reinforced in the ad and to tell whether there is a liberating sentiment that is being tapped by the producers.
http://her.oxfordjournals.org/content/19/3/239.full
www.rtvf.unt.edu/html/craig/pdfs/torches.PDF

During the face-to-face discussions of the task, the learners mentioned that they expected their responses to be two to three pages long when the intended length was two to three paragraphs. Discussions about length drew our attention to the need to provide a narrower focus and some venue for learner choice. So, these guiding questions were added to the above assignment:
To help you with finding a focus I am adding 5 questions to the assignment. You may want to select one of them and develop it into a coherent 15-20 line response. The questions are:

1. Is class an element to be considered in the advertisement?
2. Advertisements either support or oppose dominant cultural values. Would you say that this advertisement is reinforcing cultural notions about women that were common at the time?
3. What ages does the advertisement target and what are their beliefs? What roles does it define for the targeted age group?
4. Compare the slogans in the e-articles with the ones used in our ad. Are their meanings similar or different? In which ways are they similar or different?
5. Compare the themes of advertising campaign mentioned in the e-article with the ones in our advertisement. In what ways are the themes similar or different?

Twenty students responded the next day. By the time the assignment was due all class members have responded to the task. Their responses were carried to the discussion board for peer and instructor feedback. The class was divided into teams of three and the team members were asked to comment on each other's contributions.

RECCOMENDATIONS

Teachers could use a number of strategies in response to the challenges of blended education. Among the strategies that will guarantee a more effective utilization of on-line tasking and interaction are:

1. During syllabus preparation, build activities systematically into the course plan. Do not do blended materials sporadically and without a purpose.
2. Provide enough scaffolding for each activity in terms of specific tasking and length of expected response .
3. Decide which tasks you want to accomplish synchronously in the computer lab in a face-to-face setting and which are more appropriately done by students themselves with you remaining invisible.
4. Early in the semester, train students on how to use university e-learning environments.
5. For the discussion tasks, make the experience into a public conversation between you and all and between each student and all class.
6. Also, keep the focus on ideas for the most part. Do not interrupt a conversation to cater for language problems.
7. Reward and grade learners' online work.
8. Use the right IT tool for the right task.

It may sound both reassuring and inviting for teachers who want to experiment with e-learning environments but are afraid of the challenges to say at the end that the IT skills the instructor needs to have are the basic keyboarding and internet surfing skills. With those skills, and the desire and willingness to develop my teaching methods, I could survive my first experience not without surprises and flaws. For your first experience with technology assisted learning, as long as you keep it simple, and you use the tools that you know and your students are familiar with, and with the right level of sensitivity to course learning outcomes, the experience will offer plenty of rewarding professional development opportunities for you and motivation raising experiences for the learners.

As a first step, and for the experience not to become a frustrating one, it is important to start by utilizing the functions available through the LMS platforms and to keep the task simple. Vagueness, inappropriateness of e-tool, and the lack of purpose for e-activity are all recipes for low or no responses .

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Appendix A. Examples of two weeks from the syllabus:

Week 2

Feedback and rewriting and submission of task 1

Unit 2: Teaching at school: open and extended classrooms

Listening and reconstruction

Interactive listening: listen and take notes and be prepared to share information and respond to questions

OCC task 2: Formal letter writing

Task:

Write a letter to the dean of your college requesting a change in teaching methods. You may have to include a paragraph on why the change is necessary and in another paragraph or two to introduce the advantages of newer teaching methods like "the open classroom" and "the extended classroom". The tone of your opening and closing sentences are very important to the success or failure of your communication.

Weeks three and four:

OCC task 3: Feedback: tone and appeal

Task: I want you to look at your response to the customer inquiry. This time I want you to mark the sentences that are not positive in tone and to modify those. I want you to pay attention to the opening and closing sentences and to suggest changes to make closure more appealing.

Project topic selection

Unit 3: owning a small business

Listening and reconstruction

Listening and filling a purchase order form

Interview skill：

OCC task 4: discussion board prepare 10 interview questions

Task: Interview the person in charge and use the interview as a data collection tool for your project.

OCC task 5: discussion tool: sentence building

Task: The following words are from the interview you listened to yesterday. Use each in a complete sentence.

1. wear too many hats
2. put it on hold
3. believe my ears

4. turn down an offer
5. give/get a special offer

Appendix B

Assessment Rubric

10 point response supported by information from secondary sources

Criterion	2	1	0
Assigned Topic	Response addresses one of the 5 questions given in the assignment.	Response does not address any of the questions	No response posted
Presentation of ideas	The writer makes a clear judgment on the ad. content. The opinion is supported by citing evidence from the ad.	The writer's judgment is not clear, and only a few references are made to the ad.	The writer does not give a clear judgment and no reference is made to ad.
Mechanics	There are 1-2 spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors.	There are 3-6 spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors.	There are more than 6 spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors
Using e-links	The writer cites and uses the e-links as sources of information or as supporting evidence.	The writer refers to the e-links only once or the writer misrepresents the facts from the e-materials.	No reference is made to assigned e-material.
Posting on due date	The response was submitted on the date and at the time specified or a documented excuse is given to justify the delay.	The response was not turned in on the date and at the time specified and No documented excuse submitted.	No posting made