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CALL FOR PAPERS
FOR THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL “PALIMPSEST”

МЕТОДИКА
НА НАСТАВАТА



TEACHING
METHODOLOGY

Igor Rižnar

BLENDED LANGUAGE LEARNING AND FLIPBOARD IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract: Blended learning is a term used to describe courses combining face-to-face classroom instruction with computer-based learning. Based on our previous research, this paper discusses the development of blended language learning/teaching practice and Flipboard application at the Faculty of Management, University of Primorska, Slovenia. During the last decade, the use of technology in education has had a large impact in the field of education not only because it can reduce cost both for students and higher education institutions, but also because of its adaptability. The ubiquity of MOOCs, increasing popularity of flipped classrooms, and other technologies and/or software (say, Flipboard) created the ability to offer high-quality higher education courses for free, and, on the other side, courses could be taken from anywhere, at any time, provided that there is Internet access.

Keywords: *blended foreign language learning, computer assisted language learning, Flipboard, tertiary education.*

Introduction

In tertiary education institutions, digital literacy is crucial for students. According to the Future Lab's report (Hague and Payton, 2010) students need to be able to have access to a broad range of practices and cultural resources in order to make and share meaning in different modes and formats and to create, collaborate and communicate effectively and to understand how digital technologies can be used to support these processes. The variety of possibilities makes it possible for the students to collaborate and communicate effectively and become more creative in their process of learning.

The combined approach of using ICT with more traditional tutor-led teaching seems to appeal to many learners. It has the advantage of group interaction, listening, speaking and writing practice as well as allowing the learners to work at their own pace. Guidance and assistance from the tutor gives confidence to those learners with little previous experience of using ICT, making the learning experience more rewarding as both language and ICT skills are being practiced. In addition, online courses are a good way to democratize and change higher education so as to better suit learners regardless of their social status or geographical background.

Online instruction has become increasingly popular as a mode of instruction in many higher education institutions. Despite the fact that some tertiary education language teachers are still more comfortable with textbooks and because some teachers believe that the use of computers threatens

traditional literacy skills, there is a growing number of language teachers who are aware of the importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for changing the ways in which English as a foreign language can be taught.

At the Faculty of Management (FM), CALL has a rather long tradition spanning over a period of at least 15 years. Being aware that online courses and real world classrooms are two completely different environments and having only limited resources available for the investment in IT infrastructure, we have been forced to be extremely pragmatic in our approach.

During the first phase of CALL, in the 1990s, Sara, WordSmith Tools and other concordancing software programmes were used, most often to compare what grammar sections of various textbooks or/and Internet pages teach about English tense systems and what learners could find about it through practical work with vocabulary frequency lists, concordances, keyword lists, etc. The results showed that the use of tenses, among other things, is very often verb-dependable. Students also discovered that hard and fast rules regarding tenses should be substituted by corpus-based and data-driven notions (Rižnar 2009, 2009b).

The second phase of CALL at the FM took place in the academic year 2007–2008; several e-lecture rooms were set up using Moodle. Their layout was similar as they consisted of an introductory section in which the course objectives, assignments and course requirements were described. The e-lecture room for the first-year students, for instance, comprised of eight sections in which the main activities were described and written texts and MP3s were available for downloading. The texts in this section were related to the topics that were discussed during the F2F sessions. In addition, a set of guidelines was prepared for the students and the *Language Portfolio for students of management*.

Academic courses and programmes aimed at meeting the lifelong and just-in-time education needs of various target groups of students represent a sound approach to rethinking language teaching/learning practice at post-secondary education institutions. Equally important, students in higher education institutions with advanced foreign language skills need rich input in terms of quality, quantity, variety, genuineness and relevance.

Introduction of Flipboard

In 2014, Flipboard was introduced at the FM. Students were asked to read two articles from the Flipboard magazine *Teaching with brain in mind* and give a short presentation of what they had read at the beginning of each f2f session. Despite being, on average, rather shy and not very keen on giving presentations in front of the whole class, they enjoyed reading and reporting activity, mainly because they found the articles relevant.

Flipboard is a social-network aggregation software initially released in 2010, which enables collecting content from websites and presenting them in a

magazine format. Developed by Flipboard Inc., the software works on the following platforms: Android, Blackberry OS, iOS, Windows, Mac OS and on Windows phones. First the application was launched for the iPad, and was later updated to add support for the iPhone and iPod Touch. From 2012, Flipboard was released for some Android phones and in 2013 for Windows 8. In the early 2015, Flipboard became available on the web. The application's user interface (UI) enables intuitive flipping through content.

On the application website (flipboard.com) a reader who is signed in sees Cover stories, which represents the highlights from everything one follows. The second item on the menu is 'Following' where one sees individual magazines one follows and which open once a user clicks on them. The last item on the menu is Explore, which brings into view all magazines curated on the Flipboard by all users arranged in a number of sections (New & Noteworthy, By Our Readers, News, Business, Tech & Science, Sports, Photos & Design, etc.).

On the right side of the menu one can search for articles by typing in sources, people or topics and check who has reflipped/liked/commented on a topic posted. By clicking on the circle (with or without a photo of the signed in user) on the far right side of the menu a new window opens with data of the magazine curator. Data includes the number of magazines curated, the number of flipped articles, the number of followers and the number of likes. This is also the page where a new magazine can be created and where all curators' magazines are presented. By clicking on one of them, the magazine opens and by scrolling down the content can be seen. When the page opens, you can also see the number of viewers for the particular magazine, the number of followers for that magazine and the number of articles in the magazine.

Two terms are frequently used by Flipboard users:

- flip means add what you like into your magazine to read later or to share with others;
- share can mean share via email, via Twitter or via Facebook;

If you click on the Edit tab in the far right bottom corner of the magazine a new window opens, where you can invite others to contribute to your magazine. On the same page you can determine if the magazine is locked or if everyone can see it. On this page you can delete the magazine if you want and, by clicking on Stats on the left side see the most important analytics (what was most viewed during a certain period of time, the number of viewers by day and page flips by day).

According to The Wall Street Journal (MacMillan, 2015) Flipboard has 80 million active users, but the competition is fierce (Apple launched its own news aggregation application, Apple News).

Some of the ideas how Flipboard can be helpful for teachers/students can be found on Flipboard for educators (<https://about.flipboard.com/inside-flipboard/flipboard-for-educators/>) where you can learn about various uses of

Flipboard in teaching and learning. Among the many possible uses let us mention the following:

1. for keeping up on the current events
2. for creating a class syllabus
3. for creating a class-project magazine
4. for creating a resource guide on a single topic
5. for curating relevant reading materials
6. for collaboration by inviting other educators to collaborate on a magazine
7. for keeping parents informed
8. for flipping your school's posts into a magazine.

The basic tutorials can be found on <https://about.flipboard.com/tutorials>, the most important tools can be downloaded from <https://about.flipboard.com/tools>, help and feedback are available here: <https://about.flipboard.com/help-center>, and job updates here: <https://about.flipboard.com/careers>.

In order to collect and share valuable information with students a magazine entitled Teaching with brain in mind was created in 2014. The three main purposes of the magazine were the following:

- to increase students' language awareness (LA): the explicit knowledge about language with the emphasis on language learning and teaching as well as language use (Association for Language Awareness, 2012)
- to increase students' brain awareness (BA): awareness of the progress and benefits of brain research
- to debunk learning myths: misconceptions about learning styles, left/right brain hypothesis, male/female brain, 10 % brain usage etc.

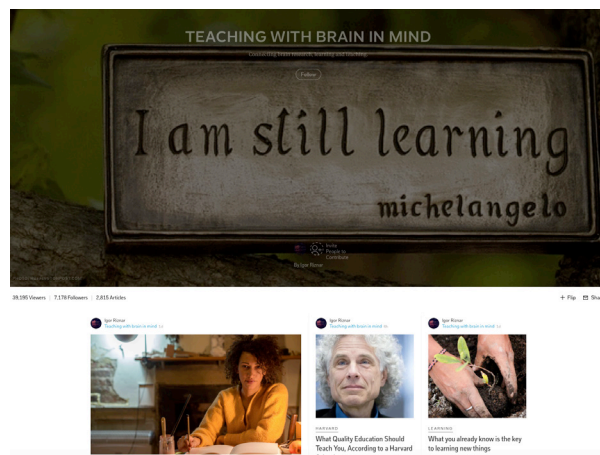


Figure 1
A sample page of the Teaching with Brain in Mind Flipboard magazine

The curated magazine has so far attracted around 40.000 viewers, has more than 7.000 followers and includes around 3.000 articles. Simply put, the magazine aims at connecting brain research, learning and teaching.

The present study

Expected results

It was expected that a sound approach to blended language learning in both groups of students (full—time and part-time) at the FM would provide a positive learning experience. It was also expected that students would like the diversified learning concept offered by the blended language learning approach, that they were willing to accept the variety of materials with keen interest and enthusiasm and that they would value highly the flexibility of time and space offered by the blended language learning approach. On the other hand, we also predicted that there might be some motivation problems, minor technical problems and that some students may find the workload too high.

Participants

80 full-time first year (30 participants) and second year (50 participants) students took part in the blended English language course. In accordance with *the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, the participating students were independent users of English (ranging from B1 to B2 level). 83 % or 25 first year students and 92 % or 46 second year students fulfilled all course requirements in due time. The second research activity carried out during the academic year 2011-2012 included 45 part-time students who were also independent users of English (B1 to C1). 36 or 80 % of part-time students managed to fulfil all course requirements in due time and passed the final exam.

Instruments

In order to assess the satisfaction of students participating in the blended learning Business English course at the FM a questionnaire was prepared in which we inquired about students' computer and Internet literacy as well as about their satisfaction with the Business English e-lecture room and online activities. The questionnaire consisted of a set of closed-ended questions (multiple choice and scaled questions) and a set of open-ended questions (unstructured questions).

Procedure

In order to introduce e-learning/teaching practice at the FM in Koper (The University of Primorska, Slovenia) in the academic year 2011/2012 two e-lecture rooms were set up using Moodle, a free software e-learning platform. The layout of all e-lecture rooms was similar as they all consisted of an introductory section in which course objectives, assignments and course

requirements were described. The e-lecture room for the first year students comprised of eight sections, two for each week, in which main activities were described and written texts and MP3s were available for downloading. Texts in this section were related to topics discussed during the f2f sessions (Topics were qualities of good managers, business etiquette, company structure and organisation, entertaining, describing trends, presentations, telephoning, business trips and annual reports). In addition, a set of guidelines was prepared for students (e.g. guidelines for oral presentations, general course guidelines, guidelines for summarising and note-taking, guidelines for writing e-mail, guidelines for the English Tense System, guidelines for writing a CV, etc.)

The e-lecture room for second year students also comprised of eight sections, two for each week, but with a selection of materials on the following topics: human resources and job interviews, international trade, banking, stock exchange, mergers and acquisitions, marketing, advertising, the European Union and commercial correspondence. A section called Resources represented links to useful Internet sites; the section called Miscellaneous Resources consisted of materials students could use in order to improve their language skills.

Both e-lecture rooms also had an additional section with sample tests and a section in which a number of longer texts were available for download. Both groups of students could also download the *Language Portfolio for students of management*, which has been prepared by the author of this article according to common criteria accepted throughout Europe. The document contains a detailed language biography describing the student's experiences in languages and is designed to guide the learner in planning and assessing progress. The language portfolio has two main aims: 1. to motivate students by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills and 2. to provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills students have acquired. The pedagogic functions of the Portfolio are: a) to enhance students' motivation, b) help students to reflect their objectives, ways of learning and success in language learning, c) help students to learn autonomously and d) encourage students to enhance their language and cultural experience.

Before the beginning of the academic year 2011-2012, three more e-lecture rooms were designed. The layout of these new e-lecture rooms was identical to the previously designed e-lecture rooms, some of the materials were updated, new texts were added, some old texts were not included and some minor changes were made with regard to the overall layout.

The number of pages for students to download exceeded several thousand, and ranged from (business) vocabulary exercises, proficiency tests, interview tips, features of social language, recommended additional study literature, information on various language corpuses, notes on efficient learning and cultural differences, to name but a few. The texts available in the e-lecture room were prepared by the teacher during his 30-year practice as a teacher of Business English in higher education institutions in Slovenia and had been

extensively trialled with students before being used in any of the e-lecture rooms.

Active class participation, home assignments in the form of writing short summaries on a weekly basis, posting a number of comments on topics related to the discussed issues during face-to-face lectures were essential prerequisites for students to be entitled to take the final written and oral examination. Students had to participate in at least two forums on a business topic started by the teacher. They had to write at least six posts and comment upon at least twice as many posts written by their fellow students.

Through the analysis of questionnaires, we obtained useful information about students' computer skills, Internet skills, e-mail skills, the amount of their time spent on the Internet, and their awareness of different services provided on the Internet (e-mail, search engines, file transfer protocol, discussion groups, social networking, and chatting). We also asked the participants how the Internet influenced their academic efficiency. Students were asked about their attitude towards blended language learning experience, and had to assess (on a scale from 1-not useful to 5-extremely useful) the usefulness of documents and activities available in the e-Lecture room. Last but not least, we wanted to know to what extent they were satisfied with the Business English e-lecture room and if they think that e-lecture room could replace f2f teaching. The respondents were also encouraged to make suggestions to improve the existing e-lecture rooms.

Results

The analysis of questionnaires has shown that in both groups, the blended English course was judged as "good" or "very good". The following aspects were regarded as especially positive by both groups of students (full-time and part-time): the diversified learning concept, the variety and quality of the multimedia learning materials, the new learning experience with the chat, the possibility to direct one's own learning process and the flexibility of time and space, the communication contact with other participants and quick responses of the teacher.

On the whole, adjusting to this new form of course was judged as unproblematic. This is due to the fact that all full-time students rated their current computer skills as either very good (second year students) or good to very good (first year students). Their Internet skills were rated as good (10 first year students or 33 %; 36 second year students or 72 %) and their e-mail skills as very good by both groups of students. On average, students in both groups spend a substantial share of their time on the Internet. Only four (or 13 %) first year students spend just 2-4 hours a week on the Internet, one student spends between 5-6 hours on the Internet, while 5 students (17 %) spend on the Internet between 7 and 9 hours a week. Six students in their first year of study spend between 10 and 20 hours online and 14 students or 63 % of all students spend more than 20 hours a week on the Internet. Second year students spend on the

Internet even more time. 26 students (52 %) wrote that they spend more than 20 hours a week online, 11 or 22 % of second year students spend between 7 and 9 hours on the Internet, 8 (16 %) students spend between 10 to 20 hours online, only three (6 %) students are online between 5 and 6 hours weekly and two second year students are online between two and four hours a week.

With regard to the part-time students, the following differences and similarities are worth mentioning: Internet skills of part-time students were most often rated as very good (75 %), part-time students spend slightly less time on the Internet (on average, roughly 66 % of students spend 2-4 hours on the Internet, while the remaining 33 % of students spend on the Internet either between 5-6 hours or less than 2 hours a week).

Students (both full-time and part-time) had proper awareness of different services provided on the Internet, with a clear preferences for www, e-mail and search engines, followed by Facebook, discussion groups and chatting in both groups of students. With regard to the influence of the use of the Internet on students' academic efficiency, respondents in both groups (part-time and full-time) believe that the use of conventional documents has decreased and that the dependency on the Internet has increased substantially.

Despite the fact that students in both groups (full-time and part-time) were, on average, very satisfied with the Business English e-lecture room (18 or 60 % of first year full-time students were fully satisfied and 12 or 40 % of full-time students were partially satisfied; 41 or 82 % of second year full-time students were fully satisfied and 9 or 18 % of full-time students were partially satisfied; similarly, 64 % of part-time students were fully satisfied with the blended course, with 36 % of part-time students being partially satisfied). On the other hand, only one full-time student thought that e-Lecture room could replace f2f teaching completely. High student satisfaction is reported by a number of researchers (DeBourgh, 1999, Hara and Kling, 2000; Conrad, 2002; Marquis, 2004; Bourne and Seaman, 2005; Albrecht, 2006).

Students' attitude towards blended language learning experience was, on average, between positive and very positive in both groups of respondents, with almost 84 % of second year students who would recommend e-lectures to a friend and 73 % of first year students who would do the same. The results for the part-time students differed slightly, with 71 % (or 32 students) who would recommend blended activities to their friends.

All students frequently printed out at least some documents connected with individual sessions, which were – on a scale from 1 – not useful at all to 5 – extremely useful – ranked with 4.2 by second year students and 3.7 by first year students, whereas the usefulness of online activities was ranked slightly lower by both groups of students (by 3.9 and 3.6 respectively). Part-time students ranked the documents as extremely useful (4.1) and activities as useful (3.5). Chapelle (2001) points out that one criterion of CALL task appropriateness is 'learner fit'. If the language level of a task is too easy, learners will not develop their ability, if too difficult, they will give up. In

Slovenian higher education environment learners are sometimes mixed into classes without regard to their command of language, or taught in ways that do not match their goals. Other researchers report the same problems (Felder and Henriques, 1995; Robinson, 2002).

Discussion

With new technologies, the world of teaching and learning is far from being less complex; on the contrary, it is richer and, above all, more demanding. The technology-enhanced business English learning/teaching practice at the FM in Koper strengthens my belief that blended learning and teaching should be further developed because it involves the learning process, which is learner-centered and autonomy-based. In addition, the rich resources of language learning materials put the students in the position of decision-makers with regard to the content of their study. Equally important, the language environment provides the learners with learning stimuli for both language competence and new contents and reflections on language and intercultural phenomena, as well as on the aspects of the learning process itself. Our aims were also to provide a more flexible approach to language learning, encourage learner autonomy, personalize the learning experience, improve the retention rate, and to find a route to more motivated students and more successful courses.

Blended language learning/teaching combined with Flipboard application provide an acceptable means to question traditional face-to-face learning experiences. Flipboard was mainly used to increase students' language awareness (i.e. their knowledge about language and language learning), to increase their brain awareness (i.e. the awareness of the progress and benefits of brain research) and in order to debunk learning myths (misconceptions about learning styles, left/right brain hypothesis, male/female brain, 10 % brain usage, etc.). At the same time, control of the learning experience was transferred to the students who were engaged in online and class activities armed with the most current information and were prepared to engage in the creative process of making sense of the information. Last but not least, reporting on topics they have read made them considerably more talkative during the f2f sessions.

In our research, the following strengths of blended language learning/teaching were identified: convenience, high retention rate, promotion of independent learning, life-long learning, learner-centred approach, and the possibility of self-study with authentic content. Furthermore, blended method is appropriate if wide dissemination is desired, it helps create documentation and may help reduce ambiguity, and it may be used by many people at the same time.

On the other hand, the following weaknesses were identified: lack of personal communication, loss of context (poorly edited or unrelated pieces of information can be difficult to understand), minor technical problems, motivation problems (especially for students with poor language skills),

information overload (students can receive too difficult, unwanted or irrelevant information of little use to them) and increased teacher workload.

Among the most interesting suggestions to improve the Business English e-lecture room the following should be pointed out: video-recorded face-to-face lectures could be uploaded to the e-Lecture room for students who missed lectures, short video clips could be added, some students wished there would be more team-work and project work.

Both full-time and part-time students pointed out the following obstacles: some minor technical problems were mentioned, some activities were too time-consuming, some students found the work-load to be (too) high, some texts too difficult to understand, the possibility of self-organisation bore the risk of "shallow" learning activities, and there were also some motivation problems, especially in the group of first year students and part-time students with below the average command of language.

Conclusion

In Slovenia, the potential of blended learning as a catalyst for change in higher education has been recognized by some teachers who are rethinking their teaching and learning practices. It can be argued that the highly volatile higher education environment of the 21st century needs both managers and teachers who will be able to transform tertiary education institutions in order to respond to the constant changes. What we need are academic courses and programs that aim to meet the lifelong and just-in-time education needs of various target groups of students. In their efforts to maintain or enhance their competitiveness, universities and faculties should strive to be proactive and innovative. This can, to some extent, be done by moving from F2F interaction into blended mode of teaching/learning, forming university/industry strategic alliances or addressing the niche markets that are ignored by competitors. Technology-related developments are change drivers that have significantly reshaped tertiary education in pursuit of flexible lifelong learning, new learning paradigms and online delivery.

Today, the needs of students cannot be met simply by the imperfect fine-tuning of the *status quo* in higher education institutions. Thus, online learning environments should go beyond the replication of learning events that traditionally occur in the classroom and are made available through the Internet. Online learning/teaching environments provide for different ways of learning and the construction of a potentially richer learning environment that provides for fresh approaches to learning, caters for different learning styles, as well as allows for greater diversification in learning and greater access to learning. Such learning environments should supplement or complement traditional f2f learning environments or may, on the other hand, provide a complete learning package that requires little f2f contact.

The knowledge society and ubiquitous communications technologies have triggered significant changes in the society, which can lead to the

transformation of higher education institutions with the concept of blended (language) learning as a powerful tool to mobilize innovation, rethink our teaching/learning approaches as well as fight sadistic teaching which is much too often encouraged by textbooks. In the process, the role of teachers will certainly change, as we will direct them to resources, make recommendations, help interpret resources, monitor students' progress, give them feedback, boost their confidence and maintain their motivation.

The main purpose of our efforts was to find a route to better teaching/learning, more motivated students and more successful courses through the implementation of computer technologies and to assess their potential for language learning and teaching in post-secondary education in Slovenia. Our aims were to provide a more flexible approach to language learning, encourage learner autonomy, personalize the learning experience, improve the retention rate, and find a route to more motivated students and more successful courses. If the ultimate goal of educational experience is not to acquire fragments of information but to collaboratively construct important concepts and schema based on important ideas and information, then carefully planned blended language courses have the potential to transform teaching and learning in higher education.

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