

EFFECTIVENESS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE BLENDED COURSE A CASE STUDY OF SPORTS STUDENTS AT NATIONAL SPORTS ACADEMY "VASIL LEVSKI"

Original scientific paper

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Abstract

This study examined sports students' performance and perceptions of a Foreign Language blended course which was held for the 1st year students of Training Faculty at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski". The course's effectiveness is analyzed through students' linguistic competence for some areas of language learning but also their satisfaction (perceptions and attitudes) toward the course. The perceived effectiveness of this blended course designed for sports students in perspective of acquiring some language knowledge and skills related to sports has been different for the two focus groups. The experimental study was conducted for a definite period of time and had initial and final phases. A comparative analysis has been done at the end of the course which showed students' academic achievement by focus groups evaluation and student survey. The results showed that experimental group students' achievement had an important increase compared to control group students' performance. This study encourages the use of Foreign Language blended courses, showing that the students had positive perceptions of their usefulness, and recommends using such types of learning for their other academic courses.

Keywords: *foreign language blended learning, pedagogical experiment, traditional face-to-face course, Student's T-test, factor analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Important social, economic and technological transformations both at European level and in Bulgaria, the processes of globalization and electronic communication in various spheres of public life, set new, higher demands and challenges to professional training and qualification of young people.

These new tendencies and developments cause not only discussions, but significant changes in education policies and practices. Foreign language acquisition become an important part of building up personal career and profession. They impose new administrative and teaching approaches that are related to changes supporting the development of new competencies and assuring successful implementation of sports professionals.

Foreign language teaching and learning are no longer restricted to traditional classrooms, while e-learning (electronic learning) has become one of the powerful supporting tools which have diversified the traditional context of teaching and learning in educational institutions. The rapid development of technology, the Internet as a delivery platform has motivated universities to invest their resources on developing online programs (Slavova (Славова) 2014).

Advances in technology provide new opportunities for teachers to design and deliver their courses in ways that support and enhance the teachers' role, the students' individual cognitive experiences, as well as the social environment. „Agonal approach, for example, used in foreign language teaching, particularly in sports studies, will revive ancient principles of competition and consequently will increase foreign language learning motivation through activa-

ting psychic processes related to the human capacity of memorizing“.

The main question is not just using technology because it is available but finding better ways of supporting students in achieving the learning objectives and providing them with the best possible learning and experiences through blended learning practices.

Meanwhile, the blended course, which combines online components with the conventional face-to-face teaching, has emerged as an alternative mode of teaching and learning foreign languages and a substantial supplement. With opportunities and barriers as well, however, the development and management of e-learning are still challenging, especially for the continuous improvement of students' learning effectiveness via e-learning for blended courses.

Garrison and Vaughan focus mainly on pedagogical rather than the technological efficiency of Blended Learning "... traditional oral communication and written online communication are integrated into the learning experience in accordance with the present educational context and educational purposes".

However, in order to achieve an optimal balance between quality and affordability in the sports specialists' preparation it is necessary to create and implement a variety of different models of blended learning designed for foreign language study.

Therefore, consideration needs to be given on how to assess the success of blended learning courses. It should not be surprising then that a large body of literature has emerged on how to assess these novel teaching blended strategies.

There are two main methods of assessing the effectiveness of a blended learning course.

The first one involves the measurement of the students' satisfaction with this course. This is usually done through surveys or focus groups.

The second method involves comparing students' performance at the beginning and at the end of the course. In this paper we pursue both methods of assessing the foreign language blended course for sports students.

METHODS

This paper assesses the students' academic achievement in two-terms blended course conducted at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" during 2012/2013. The pedagogical experiment involved replacing the traditional face-to-face course with a blended learning approach involving conventional face-to-face teaching followed by material and activities delivered exclusively online. Our objective was to measure the impact of students' performance at the end of the experiment and their perceptions of foreign language blended course. Of a great importance for the efficiency of the educational process is how students perceive this new educational technology and how they achieve the main goals of foreign language education based on obtaining knowledge and building skills and habits for lifelong learning.

A topic-based, learner-centered curriculum has been designed to meet learners' needs and interests. Syllabus content has been developed taking account of the target learners' profile that emerged from work carried out with focus groups on campus. This profile included information about learners' attitudes to learn foreign languages (English and French) and to use e-learning as a part of foreign language teaching, their professional needs and activities, foreign language knowledge level and information they believed a person would need to be able to communicate in the field of sports. Through modules students learn the language they need to know in order to meet sports people, talk about their sports and training activities, learn sports terminology necessary for understanding the professionals, sports stars and authentic sports documents. The foreign language teaching program integrates a combination of task-based language learning approaches with content-based teaching and computer-supported collaborative learning through the web-based platform Nicenet used during the blended learning course. Students were encouraged to develop their autonomous learning abilities and to work towards fulfilling their language learning goals. The platform used during the course is a free classroom assistant which contains all materials and tools students need for their language-learning work, such as written documents, wordbook, class schedule, discussion forum, internet resources, online assignments, among other functionalities.

The experiment was planned and based on the concrete design of 24 modules course for the first-year students at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski". The comparison has been made between two groups – control (n=50) and experimental (n=49) which were formed respecting some criteria of equality such as level of foreign

language knowledge, number and year of the study. The experimental group students were enrolled in the foreign language blended course and the control group students were taught a traditional face-to-face foreign language methodology. A special written language test has been elaborated for measuring the impact of the course on the students' linguistic competence in five didactical tasks including the most important language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, listening and grammatical use of the language.

To determine the effectiveness of the new blended model is necessary to examine also the students' attitudes and perceptions during and after participating in the pedagogical experiment. A special test was adapted and validated in order to determine the motivating learning strategies for specific training (MSLQ- Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire).

A complex study methodology has been applied, which includes analysis of variance to determine the reliability of the results obtained for students' academic achievement; Student's T-test for dependent samples toward evaluating the results of didactic language tests conducted at the beginning and end of the pedagogical experiment in the experimental and control groups; Student's T-test for independent samples to compare academic achievement in the experimental and control groups; factor analysis method of main components and analysis of internal consistency of scales of Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire. Using factor analysis sufficient number of factors have been outlined that combine in themselves separate groups of related variables and correlating highly with each other; comparative analysis of final results for the academic achievement of students in the experimental and control groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained by students in the diagnostic and final assessments were compared by initial and final marks showed in Table 1. The increase in academic achievement of students in the experimental group in the final study leads to the conclusion that new pedagogical model for blended learning a foreign language is effective with regard to obtaining knowledge and developing skills established as the objectives of the experimental course.

The weak growth in students' achievement for the control group at the end of the experiment showed some disadvantages of the traditional model of foreign language teaching, which focuses mainly on textbooks and teaching materials on paper, the use of strictly defined methods, the lack of variation and creativity in teaching methodologies, the evaluation criteria which are not entirely clear and reflecting the progress of students for this course. Generally speaking, the frontal method of teaching is not sufficient to create an innovative learning environment and to achieve certain goals of educational process. Modern language teaching must take into account all new methods and approaches offered by new technologies and the Internet, where there are many options for learning and self-study.

Table 1. Students' marks comparison

Group	Measurement	Percentages				
		Poor	Passable	Good	Very good	Excellent
Experimental	Initially	8	20	31	29	12
	Final	2	10	12	31	45
Control	Initially	12	24	44	16	4
	Final	8	16	44	28	4

In this part of the analysis we processed the growths of experimental and control groups for different tasks of the language test at the end of the experimental study (Table 2.). The collected data showed high growths of academic achievement in all five tasks of didactic language test in the experimental group compared to growths for the control group. The highest was the growth of academic achievement in the experimental group for the tasks "Reading", "Speaking" and "Use of Language". This is probably due to the fact that most numerous learning activities in the new pedagogical model refer to oral communication, reading authentic texts, lexical exercises of specialized terminology included in the Use of Language section of the test.

It has been found a significant increase in educational performance of experimental students' group for four of the five tasks of the language test. It has also been determined some increase in students' performance of the students' control group, which however is lower than the growth of experimental students' group achievement. Highest students' performance in experimental group has been associated with the knowledge and skills required in tasks "Use of language", "Reading", "Speaking", "Writing" that was good indicator of the effectiveness of innovative pedagogical model of foreign language blended course. Weak performance in terms of the task "Listening" may be due to insufficient learning experience during the educational process or of poor quality of audio / video material provided for the didactic language test.

Table 2. Students' performance growths of language tasks compared for two groups

School assignments	Control group	Experimental group
Writing	3,72	4,8
Speaking	2,26	6,22
Use of language	1,74	4,82
Reading	2,18	6,86
Listening	1,52	3,86

In order to accomplish the aim of this study and diagnose the effectiveness of the foreign language blended course it has been adapted and validated a special test that determine some motivational strategies (students' interests, expectations, course evaluation, etc.), which are important in defining students' perceptions and satisfaction with the course - MSLQ (Motivated strategies for Learning Questionnaire). The test's authors perceived that the motivation of students changed from course to course during training (depending on the interest at that discipline, the efficiency of success, etc.). Motivational strategies have a strong effect on academic achievement and in some cases may be more serious and important factor in determining the success of a training course, and hence the effectiveness of the pedagogical model of education.

Factor structure of Bulgarian version of the questionnaire was validated using factor analysis method of the main components and analysis of internal consistency of scales /Cronbach's α / (Slavova & Mileva (Славова & Милева) 2013). It has been identified six factors that combine the multiple variables with factor weight equal or greater than 0.50:

First factor - Self-Efficacy for Learning & Performance ($\alpha = 0.89$);

Second factor – Task Value ($\alpha = 0.87$);

Third factor – Extrinsic Goal Orientation ($\alpha = 0.77$);

Fourth factor – Intrinsic Goal Orientation ($\alpha = 0.73$);

Fifth factor – Test Anxiety ($\alpha = 0.78$);

Sixth factor – Self-Control of Learning & Beliefs ($\alpha = 0.60$)

The test has been realized at the end of the experimental study in order to identify changes in the distribution of separate factors motivating the students of the experimental group and the control group and to compare individual factors for both groups (experimental and control) (Table 3.).

The comparative analysis showed means of the studied factors in the experimental and control groups (Table 3.). It has been found relatively large differences between motivational learning strategies for students in experimental and for those in control groups. There has been an increase of means for five of the six factors. It has been found the greatest difference in means between the two groups on the first factor - Extrinsic Goal Orientation for the experimental group $M = 5.60$, while for the control group $M = 4.14$. The main argument for this difference is probably the influence of learning environment as an external factor that is absent in control group' teaching. The same difference has been also found when comparing the means of the third factor - Self-Efficacy for learning and performance, as for the experimental group $M = 5.53$, while for the control group $M = 4.15$. Therefore, the experimental group students' confidence in their abilities to learn and pass the exam is quite large, which is probably due to both the specific personal characteristics and evaluation of the learning environment. It offers interesting learning materials and tasks, sharing ideas and positive support for learning and a feedback made by the teacher during foreign language blended course. Self-confidence is an important component in personal dimension of motivation.

It has been found a significant difference in the mean values of the fourth factor - "Test anxiety" for the experimental group $M = 5.26$, and for control $M = 4.42$. This probably is due to the large number of criteria defined for the final assessment of foreign language blended course, as well as numerous assignments during the pedagogical experiment for the experimental group of students.

Table 3. Motivational strategies for students' attitudes and perceptions

Factors	Control group	Experimental group
1.Extrinsic goal orientation	4,14	5,6
2.Intrinsic goal orientation	4,49	5,59
3.Self-efficacy for learning	4,15	5,53
4.Test anxiety	4,42	5,25
5.Task value	4,53	4,79
6. Self-control for learning	3,44	4,17

The smallest difference in fifth factor's means – Task value, related to the importance of the course – showed for the experimental group $M = 4.79$, and for control of $M = 4.53$. It shows that students in both groups have been assessed in the same positive way the course. This, obviously, is related to their perceptions of the importance of language learning for personal and professional purposes. That little difference is observed in the comparison of values in sixth factor - "Self-Control of learning" (Table 3.) as for the experimental group $M = 4.17$, while for the control group $M = 3.44$. It can be concluded that students have high levels of interest and evaluation of mixed experimental course in a foreign language.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shown above indicate statistically significant differences between experimental and control students' groups performance and satisfaction. Based on the experimental study it can be concluded that the main aim of foreign language blended course is achieved, namely building skills in a foreign language oral and written communication. It has been established students' positive attitudes and satisfaction with learning a foreign language. Young people have been interested in and have expressed strong preference for e-learning as an alternative and accompanied component of language teaching.

The analysis results have confirmed the appropriateness of foreign language blended course as the most effective model for studying languages. Basic knowledge and skills in target language have been achieved through usage of both traditional and e-learning' positive aspects of foreign language educational setting. The study of motivational learning strategies and achievements of experimental and control students' group represent an essential part of adequate planning of the educational process and evaluation of the course' effectiveness.

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