Teaching ESP in a Blended Learning Setting

Dr. Abdelkareem M. Daragmeh **/An-Najah National University**

1.0 Abstract

The 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 data presentation focuses on aligning the blended component to course skill-based goals and outcomes and the IT tools necessary for task completion. The learners' assessment of the course design and procedure offers several tips to performance improvement.

The paper references the on-line language learning models and concerns raised by technology integration practitioners. The main influences on paper method, topics and approaches are Uschi Felix's (2003) "Pedagogy on the line: identifying and closing the missing links" and Graham Davies' "Perspectives on offline and online training intitiatives". The reflections and recommendations on the online content, tools, students' and teachers' attitudes, task scaffolding and assessment practices are coming out of personal experience teaching a skill enhancement course to undergraduate learners in the Spring of 2009. Based on conclusions drawn from the available data, the paper gives a list of weaknesses, strengths, and recommendations. A description of the course and a fully detailed class procedure is also provided for the benefit of on-line practitioners in the language training programs.

2.0 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 and the awareness that the English language training environments in Palestinian tertiary institutions English suffer from a large student number, thus making it impossible to provide individual attention to each student with the necessary remedial assistance. Also the job market locally, regionally and globally has become so demanding, thus making 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 strong desire to take advantage of local and international training & professional opportunities to access information in their professional & technical fields; to reach out to international markets or professional counterparts abroad; to interact with foreign consultants, donors, 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. The availability of technology both on campuses and at homes and the great potentials of e-learning environments make computer-assisted teaching and learning one good option to explore.

3.0 Program potentialities

These are some of the potential uses for blended learning classes as experienced by the researcher and as reported by the learners in their evaluation of the course.

1. Computer lab environments provide for immediate access to relevant information in a CALL class.
2. Greater opportunities for immediate teacher-to-student and student-to-student exchanges through accessing individual student screens and the possibility to project screen content for all class members.
3. A greater opportunity for learning by modeling through accessing templates anytime, anyplace.
4. Professional development of university Language teachers in pedagogy
5. Using a variety of texts like chapters, images, advertising, newscasts, films, recordings, websites, e-links, and templates leads to a more active learning experience.
6. Completion of issues that could not be finished in the face-to-face classroom due to time and class size limitations.
7. The practice of models that were presented and discussed in a face-to-face setting.
8. Complementing but not replacing the currently teacher-oriented teaching methods.
9. Inclusion of assignments that motivate independent learning and creativity.
10. Synchronous and asynchronous peer feedback
11. Raising student motivation level with the opportunity to learn by doing
12. Recording class presentation and uploading them for student assessment and feedback

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.

4.0 ESP practices: Why an e-component

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

These learning environments are 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 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 or her courses, and training in how to use the technology can be done over the phone or in a preset one-on-one consultation offered by IT personnel on campus.

5.0 E-learning realities in higher education

The serious efforts towards the integration of technology in university education on a steady and stable basis started only recently. Evidence from IT centers' records indicates that the beginning goes back to 1998/1999 with a UNDP sponsored project that aimed at designing educational e-courses to students of electricity 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 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 like LMS called OCC1 (online course container) and more recently OCC2 (authoring tool based on SCORM). At the levels of policy making, the university strategic plan sets technology integration as a main priority.

In an interview with staff members who experimented with technology-assisted learning, they voiced two different views. The first view is satisfied with the university's existing infrastructure and the students' on-line interaction. The source of their optimism comes from the fact 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 web1 tools (e.g. LMS, OCC1, OCC2) which have become outdated and obsolete. For them, web1 tools are no more than posting the content of the educational material online. Students just go for information; they simply go for sites and they do not 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 and that our students are digital natives, and we need to immigrate to the digital natives to fulfill their needs. For all these reasons, they thought the instructors should be trained on using Web2 tools in teaching and learning such as facebook, twitter, wikie space, 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 natives (i.e. 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.

5.0 Skill enhancement: a blended learning experiment

The course to which I chose to add the blended learning component aims at enhancing student capabilities, and improving their skills so that they can become prepared for the job market, if they decide to enter it, and for 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 skills. To acquire these skills, students are given cases and are asked to apply these skills on them.

The learners come from across disciplines, and so the skills emphasized are of generic nature. Writing and communication receive more emphasis than reading and listening although the assigned tasks require reading and often class discussions are based on recorded materials. The writing assignments include summary of reports, report writing and proposal writing. The communication part trains on writing formal and informal communications, and presentations, and interviews. To give an idea about the kind and sequencing of class activities, for example, 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 course meets in the computer lab with internet access and a control unit that would allow the teacher to access individual student screens for follow-up and feedback. The students will do the tasks themselves, find information, write their messages, and the teacher will offer both synchronous oral and written advice. The blended component was included to utilize the potential applications listed under section 3 above. The method used to teach the course was very much learner centered and for it to be successful it requires 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. Obviously, the reverse is true.

6.0 Challenges

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

1. Students' English proficiency level was surprising. As one of the major courses, the instructor finds out that it is the only one in English, as other required courses for this major are taught in Arabic.
3. Lack of coherence in the course assignment. As a first experience the tasks sometimes are assigned without a clear purpose or a reasonable sequence.
4. e-task integration 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. The tasks in this way come either as unimportant surplus or as burden that requires additional time and effort.
5. Students' habits. Students are used to traditional texts and teacher written feedback. It will take time to soften their attitudes and increase their trust in the e-text. The majority among respondents considered electronic texts unworthy of critical attention and of no real value to developing student language proficiency. Texts to them are printed material.
6. 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.
7. Space limitations. Classrooms are not well-equipped with teaching aids such as LCD, laptop, smart-board, internet connection which are badly needed to use for such a course. Computer labs are much more suitable for the functions of e-learning but there is a limited number of those labs
8. Large classes. There is always the fear that with large classes e-learning experiences will add more burden to the teachers.
9. Teacher readiness. Some teachers are de-motivated to implement blended learning. When you have a multi-section course, adequate knowledge in using modern technology appropriately or in blended learning/ course designing is a challenge.

10.0 Knowledge-based questions

As the teacher embarks on the design of e-materials and e-tasks there are knowledge-based concerns that s/he needs to keep an eye on. These concerns are:

1. The functions of blended environments
2. Low proficiency learners
3. Assessment practices
4. Electronic links
5. Web 1 and web 2 environments
6. Blended teaching for large classes
7. On-line feedback practices
8. Rubrics and templates
9. Activity scaffolding

11.1 Blended learning application in the course.

 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.

a. Short comment responses

b. Extension of classroom discussions

c. Knowledge application

d. Improving writing skill

e. Student on-line discussions

f. Use of on-line ideas for discussions at a higher level in the classroom

g. Posting of useful resources

h. Exam review

i. Students suggestion of exam questions

k. Additional materials for students who want to do more or those who need more attention

l. Online peer feedback

m. Opening one forum for each skill, one for writing, one for discussion, etc.

11.2 Teacher To-do list:

A teacher 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. Build activities systematically into the course plan. Do not do blended materials sporadically and without a purpose.
2. Make it a public conversation between you and all and between each student and all class.
3. Include student peer review
4. Focus on ideas for the most part. Do not interrupt a conversation to cater for language problems.
5. Reward and grade students.
6. provide enough scaffolding for the activity

7. Use the right IT tool for the right task
8. Train students on how to use university e-learning environments
9. Decide which tasks you want to accomplish synchronously in the computer lab in a face-to-face setting and which are appropriately done by students themselves with you remaining invisible.

11.3 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.

11.4 Large classes

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

1. Split class into teams

2. Carry conclusions to the class

3. Respond to the ones who have more problems

4. Use peer review for feedback

5. Develop self-assessment habits and provide learners with a checklist.

11.5 Assessment Practices

Traditional assessment will not serve the purpose. As a ground rule, however, is that the student effort on-line should count towards the course grade. This is the scheme I used for evaluation of the skill enhancement course:

Homework assignments, participation and attendance	15%
OCC assignments and discussion summaries	20%
Mid-term Exam	20%
Interview & presentation skill	20%
Project progress report	
Project Proposal	20%

The aim is to have a blended component that is coherent, structured and can be assessed by using a clear criterion or an evaluation grid. Assessment can be also done by:

1. Doing peer evaluation

2. A summative evaluation end of the e-activities.

3. Choosing the top two postings to grade.

11.6 Modeling and 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 the 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. An example on badly scaffolded e-activity that received low-to-no response is this:

There is no specific tasking. The type of anything, any time kind of request. It is not surprising that for two weeks not a single response was made to this task.

Another example on a well scaffolded activity is:

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.

12. 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 3 & 4:

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

13. RECCOMENDATIONS: Keep it simple

It sound reassuring and inviting 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. Two main points to keep in mind for beginner technology practitioners are:

1) The institutions to which we belong all have learning management systems, but many of us are not familiar with how to use these environment. 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.
2) As a first step, and for the experience not to become a frustrating one, we start by utilizing the functions available through the MLS platforms and keeping the task

simple. Vagueness, inappropriateness of e-tool, and the lack of purpose for e-activity are all recipes for low or no responses.

References

Felix, Uschi, ed. (2003). <u>Language learning online: towards best practice.</u> The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger publishers