

Blended Learning in a tertiary context in Mexico

Context

The Faculty of Higher Studies Acatlán (FES Acatlán) is a multidisciplinary campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), located in the northwest area of the metropolis. Its Language Learning Centre (Centro de Enseñanza de Idiomas – CEI) is one of the largest language centres in Latin America with over 30,000 students, 5,000 of whom take English courses. This case involves 119 FES Acatlán students, aged between 19 and 23. The EFL learning range is from beginners to B1.

What we blended

In these hybrid courses, face-to-face classes should be a method of scaffolding learning rather than the central instructional point as in traditional courses. That is, if students are provided with online material, online learning resources, and time to reflect, interact, and show evidence of learning, then on-site classes should be an important piece of the learning process for students and should provide dialog, group work, or demonstrations of practice. The combination of face-to-face and online modes means the learning will be active, and students will obtain a more efficient and complete learning experience.

Hybrid English courses at CEI FES Acatlán UNAM follow the dual-track model that retains the basic structure of a traditional classroom course and uses technological resources to complement these classes. This blended learning pedagogical model includes:

1. Face-to-face EFL teacher-led classes.
2. Learners' work with a Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle), with access 24/7.
3. Online monitoring by a tutor.

The course was covered in 80 hours, two sessions of four hours of face-to-face instruction and two hours per week online. The content consisted of a program, covered using a textbook, and the online activities, which were also based on the program and included: interactive learning activities, learning objects, and sites from the Internet.

Questionnaires were used to establish the students' attitude towards BL; their level of competence in the foreign language, as well as their level of competence in the use of technological resources.

What we learned

Research studies of English courses in the hybrid mode at FES Acatlán have shown that students had a more positive attitude towards the language; had significantly higher intrinsic motivation than students of face-to-face (non-hybrid) courses; were more satisfied with the learning environment and also, achieved better terminal efficiency learning outcomes compared to those who only took the on-site courses.

The following table shows the learning outcomes of several learner groups:

	*PG6	PG5	PG4	PG3	PG2	PG1	PGBasics
Participants	67.25	83.6	71.53	76.91	71.71	81.57	71.92
Non-participants	59	78.4	66.16	71.15	71.63	77.34	71.85

*PG refers to four skills courses

These results are based on the link between BL and the final learner outcome. There is a strong relationship between the students' perceptions of hybrid courses and their grades. Students with the best grades were the most satisfied; also, students expressed a desire to take another hybrid course. In terms of their use of the Internet, the results varied. 81.7% of the students used it every day; 88.5% accessed it at home. 83% use the Internet regularly for school purposes. 51.8% of students use social networks for more than an hour every day, while 29.3% use them less than an hour a day. 97.4% use Facebook, and 35.6% use Twitter.

19% had already taken a course online; only 12.04% had previously taken exams online. Most of the students, 60.73%, do not belong to any online learning community.

Benefits

There are many positive aspects of BL. Mainly, students develop their ability to function autonomously. In other words, students gain deeper understanding of their own learning and take more responsibility for it. Students work towards fulfilling their language learning goals. Student participation increases and the learning potential of each student is maximized. Teachers become more connected with, and more aware of, each student. An open connection to learning is offered at all times.

Considerations for future BL courses

For FES Acatlán, it remains challenging to design a formal faculty development program for teaching blended courses. It is difficult for instructors to find the time to redesign traditional courses into hybrid ones. It is desirable, but not always possible, to put in place an e-learning "dream team". It is also not always easy to follow an appropriate methodology to design and develop blended courses (TPACK). It is important to motivate and engage students in the use of ICTs as a means of learning and not only for socialization.

We are still working on finding the right design for blended learning. This will include designing and creating our own activities in accordance with the program rather than relying on Internet learning sites. We will also continue to use technology for instruction and learning rather than for delivering and distributing content, as well as continue preparing students to learn effectively in hybrid courses.

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