Blended Learning in ESL at Universidad Veracruzana

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Abstract

The University of Veracruz in Mexico has offered different modalities for English learning acquisition such as in-person, autonomous, and on-line through the six Language Centers (Poza Rica, Xalapa, Veracruz, Córdoba, Orizaba, and Coatzacoalcos) located in the different regions of the state. Due to the University's geographical situation and student's own economy, it has been difficult for them to attend the in-person modality, which is the most requested. For this reason, the necessity of adopting a blended modality emerged in order to offer one more option for students to take their mandatory language subjects: English 1 and English 2.

This paper presents the experiences lived by a professor who has piloted the blended modality for English 1 and English 2 at the Poza Rica Language Center and describes the advantages and disadvantages that were found during the process.

Findings suggest this modality was better welcomed by English 1 students and a regular to good welcome by the professor in charge of the piloting.

Keywords: Blended learning, English learning, university students

1. Introduction

The University of Veracruz (UV) offers different learning modalities for English as a Second Language (ESL). Among this modalities are: in-person, online, and autonomous. All of them are offered at the Language Centers which are not located in the same faculties where students attend classes for their careers. University students, who study the subjects of English 1 and English 2, attend the face to face modality at the Language Center; so, they have to move from their faculties every day. The UV, taking into account the results of a self-evaluation made to its educative model by the university community, decided to pilot a blended learning modality for the students mentioned above in order to avoid the movement from one school to another. The piloting started on August 2016 and it was carried out by only one professor at the Poza Rica Language Center.

This paper mainly aims at identifying the advantages and disadvantages of the piloted blended modality. In the first part of this document we present the background for this newly adopted modality, we subsequently describe the methodology used to reach the research objective and finally, we present the findings and conclusions of our investigation.

2. Background

2.1 Self-evaluation of the UV educative model

In June 2015, the University of Veracruz started a self-evaluation process of its own educative model called: MEIF (for its acronym in Spanish: Modelo Educativo Integral y Flexible). The Self-evaluation main objective focused on listening opinions, perceptions and proposals from all the university community in order to get new ideas to transform the educative model [6]. The task consisted of analyzing administrative difficulties and reflecting about the academic dimension taking into account the recommendations and proposals of all the community and also retrieving the good practices from the past to contribute to an adequate operation of the model.

The self-evaluation included the next strategies: an online survey with the participation of all the members of the University community, a self-evaluation exercise in each of the University regions, an interview with principals, and the analysis of past evaluations.

According to the results of this self-evaluation exercise, the university students, who study the subjects of English 1 and English 2, must move from their faculties to the Language Center to attend their in-person classes. It provokes waste of their time and economy because of the traffic problems and transportation costs [8].

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These results also mention that most of the failure rates in the subjects of English 1 and 2 are presented in the autonomous and virtual modalities because students abandon the course or have a poor performance in these modalities [8].

For the above, the Basic Formation Area (AFBG for its acronym in Spanish: Área de Formación Básica General), started a project of transformation taking into consideration the results and recommendations of the MEIF self-evaluation committee.

2.2 Transformation project of AFBG

The transformation project of AFBG was implemented in order to prioritize and benefit the students' integral formation. It proposes different short-term and medium-term actions [9]. Among the short-term actions, the AFBG put into practice a pilot project to offer the subjects of English 1 and 2 in a blended modality, using strategies to articulate the in-person, online, and autonomous modalities, as well as the configuration and application of the instructional design for the blended modality. The first step consisted of training courses for 85 professors. After that, volunteers started the piloting of the blended modality.

2.3 The blended modality

The blended modality is a type of pedagogic work characterized by an in-person and virtual combination in the teaching-learning process using information and communication technologies (TIC). Some activities are carried out through and educative platform such as EMINUS, the institutional learning platform of the UV [1].

The piloting of the blended modality was carried out during the semesters August 2016-January 2017 (semester1) and February-July 2017 (semester 2) with more than 40 teachers in each semester.

3. Methodology

For this research, we implemented a qualitative methodology whose paradigm focuses on getting a deep knowledge about people, communities, contexts, variables or situations, from the participants' very own words. In this perspective, the qualitative methodology is eminently interpretative and tries to enter the personal world of the people involved, leaving the researcher's beliefs and experiences apart, to avoid interferences in the data collection [4].

3.2 Instrument

The data collection was carried out from a semi-structured interview which is based on a set of issues or questions used as a guide, and where the interviewer is free to ask additional questions to specify concepts or obtain more information [4].

The interview focused on two main aspects regarding advantages and disadvantages of the blended modality according to the participant's experiences and point of view, and it also inquired into the results obtained during its piloting.

3.3 Participants

The participant was one professor of the Language Centre because she was the only professor who piloted the blended modality in the Poza Rica region.

4. Data analysis and results

The blended modality for the subjects of English 1 and 2 was piloted during August 2016-July 2017. The professor who carried out this piloting in Poza Rica worked with students who attended the English 1 course during semester 1. After that, during semester 2, she piloted two groups: one for English 1 and other for English 2 students. Her resting workload was dedicated to in-person courses.

One relevant observation made by the participant was that, as she had the opportunity to pilot one group in semester 1 and two groups in semester 2, she was able to improve her own teaching practices and she suggested that the most experience teachers gain in this modality, the most useful techniques will be found to provide a better guidance for students.

ADVANTAGES	All course materials are available online for students to consult them any time they need.
	The materials contain a detailed explanation of all the course subjects.
	If students are not able to attend the only face to face session in the week, they can always consult the materials.
	All materials include a great variety of activities and exercises to practice the target language.
	This modality promotes autonomy so; students learn how to work on their own.
	Students can study subjects in advance.

Table 1. Advantages.

Table 1 illustrates the advantages of the blended modality according the participating professor. They mostly refer to the benefits this modality provide regarding the availability of the learning material and the practice exercises online for students to consult them any time they need.

DISADVANTAGES	The online materials availability is not usually exploited by students.
	Some students attend classes but do not carry out their autonomous work on line.
	Some students let a lot of time pass and rush to finish all their autonomous work at the end of the semester which is not advisable.
	If students do not attend the in-person sessions, they may lose important practice opportunities with their classmates and teachers.
	During the course piloting, no student finishes the 100% of the activities and exercises they had to do online.

Table 2. Disadvantages

The disadvantages of the blended modality are mostly related to the students' unwillingness to study and do the tasks and exercises provided in the Eminus platform on their own, which is a difficult issue due to the importance of the practice opportunities they must have. See table 2.

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE ENGLISH 1 AND ENGLISH 2 STUDENTS	**English 1 Students** • Students adapted better to this modality. • They did most of their work in the platform. • They had a high percentage of attendance to the in-person sessions. • They were responsible (about 75% of the autonomous work done).
	English 2 Students • Students who previously studied the subject of English 1 in-person were not comfortable with the blended modality. • They seldom carried out the autonomous work. • Poor percentage of attendance to the in-person sessions. • They were not responsible enough. (only about 50% of the autonomous work).

Table 3. Comparison between the English 1 and English 2 students.

Table 3 illustrates a comparison made by the interviewed professor about the way students of English 1 and 2 performed during the piloting, where English 1 students performed better than English 2 students.

	Blended modality
COMPARISON BETWEEN THE BLENDED AND IN-PERSON MODALITIES	• Shorter practice opportunities. • Lower academic performance.
	In-person modality
	• Longer practice opportunities. • Higher academic performance.

Table 4. Comparison between the blended and in-person modalities.

When the participating professor was piloting the blended modality, she was also working with in-person groups. For this reason, we present a comparison between these two modalities. Table 4 illustrates that students from the in-person modality spent more time practicing the language and obtained a higher academic performance than students from the blended modality.

5. Conclusions

The results of this research include the advantages and disadvantages presented in the blended modality, according to the professor who had the piloting experience. Findings suggest the course materials available on the Eminus platform are a great advantage and strength of the modality, as well as the promotion of students' autonomy. On the other hand, the disadvantages are related to the unwillingness of some students to utilize and take advantage of the course materials.

The necessity to work harder in this modality, in order to propose new strategies to help our students get a better academic performance, is also stated. One of these strategies could be the setting of deadlines for exercises and tasks delivery in the platform, to avoid students let a lot of time pass and rush to do the activities at the end of the semester, which is not helpful for their language acquisition.

It is very important to integrate more professors in this educative modality to gather and keep record of more teaching-learning experiences at the Language Centre in Poza Rica.

It is also very important to keep track of students' academic performance in this modality in order to implement support programs for students in risk of failing and avoid high levels of course abandonment.

5.1 Recommendations

Researchers interested in continuing our investigation can focus on the analysis of students' academic performance in the mid-term and final exams of the blended modality, as well as the implementation of a research project that collects the students' perception on their blended learning, mainly in English 2 students, who mostly failed in finishing their autonomous work.

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