



Blended Language Learning in Higher Education: Students' and Tutors' Perceptions and Experiences

GRUBER Alice (1)

University of Applied Sciences Heilbronn, Germany (1)

Abstract

Recent policies and trends have led to an increased use of technology with regard to teaching practice and content delivery in higher education institutions in Germany. This paper reports on a small-scale pilot study with 41 international BA and MA students studying German at A1 level at their host institution in Germany. The weekly face-to-face lessons took place over a period of 15 weeks. In class, all tutors used the same textbook, which was dovetailed with the curriculum of the online learning platform. The participants were divided into two groups and each group worked with a different commercial language learning platform. The e-learning components consisted of both asynchronous and synchronous tools, namely self-correcting online exercises, online oral and written assignments which were marked by their respective teacher, as well as regular written chats and forum entries. The classroom tutors were also the students' respective online tutors. The e-learning component was worth 25% of the final grade and was compulsory. The aim of this paper is to examine the perceptions, satisfaction and experiences of the students and tutors in relation to the use of the blended-learning concept offered. Individual motivation was also taken into account. To this end, pre- and post-course-questionnaires were employed. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a subgroup of students. The results of this small-scale action research is aimed at contributing to the understanding of the issues and beneficial aspects of blended-learning concepts in foreign language teaching and learning in the higher education sector. Implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: *blended learning, German as a Foreign Language, autonomous learning, evaluation, ubiquitous learning;*

1. Introduction

The potential of digital technologies for foreign language learning has long been noted by foreign language researchers and educators [5]. For instance, digital technologies offer access to input and practice (audio recording, video, tutorials, drills, mini drills) and provide opportunities to communicate (asynchronous and synchronous messaging) [5]. Online components added to a traditional face-to-face-setting (F2F) and outside of the classroom have the potential to assist students' L2 development. What is more, they provide additional language practice whenever and wherever students want and encourage learner autonomy.

2. Context

The international students (N=41; 24 female, 17 male) in this study were learners of German (A1.1-level) who received 3 hours of face-to-face instruction per week over 15 weeks. A further three hours of self-study online per week were expected of them. The e-learning part was worth 25% of their final grade.

A platform called *Deutsch Uni Online* (DUO) was employed, which follows a mainly constructivist approach, including some degree of interactivity and output-practice. The second commercial platform used was *Learnlight*, which offers a bank of mainly drag-and-drop exercises, multiple choice and reading, listening and matching-up exercises. The following table gives an overview of what students were expected to accomplish for the e-learning part of their course:

6 of 7 written chats
6 of 6 forums
7 of 7 written/speaking assignments (e.g. recording themselves)
80% of all self-correcting exercises assigned to students
2 of 2 progress tests

Table 1 Compulsory components of the e-learning part

The students' performance was tracked within both systems and was accessible to their respective tutor.

3. Method

An anonymous pre-course-questionnaire (in English) was administered to gather information about students' experiences, their attitude towards learning German, their confidence and ease in using computers, their attitude towards computer use in general, their readiness to use computers for German language learning and for homework and assignments.

The anonymous post-course-questionnaire (in English) gathered information about students' perception of the online components used in the blended-learning format. It included questions about the perceived effectiveness of the online components, especially with regard to the development of their language skills. Students were also questioned about their level of anxiety regarding the use of some tools and about their autonomy as learners.

In both questionnaires, a mixture of scales was employed, including Likert-type scales and a one binary response format, when confirmation was more appropriate than degree of agreement. Open-ended questions were also included. The semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and analysed, were conducted with five self-selected students on a one-to-one basis (F2F and one via Skype).

4. Results

41 students completed the pre-course questionnaire. The results show that the majority of students acknowledge the importance of computers for knowledge acquisition (82,9%) and their career (92,7%), whereas only 48,8% are clearly positive about working with computers. The majority of the students shows a positive attitude towards the use of computers in language learning (58,6%) and believes that e-learning is a good addition to face-to-face lessons (63,4%). In terms of experience, only a minority has worked frequently with online components when learning languages in the past (26,8%).

The post-course-questionnaire, completed by 39 students, showed that 71,7% of students thought there were too many e-learning components. When asked whether they would have preferred a traditional course rather than a blended one, 58,9% felt the blended course was the better option. In this context, one student pointed out: "Because we are now in an era in which we involve technology in every aspect of life so [sic] including the e-learning is necessary by now". Only 35,8% of the students believe they would not have learnt as much German if the e-learning components had not been part of the course. 58,9% felt the combination of F2F and online learning was enjoyable. However, only 38,4% felt motivated by the online components, 1/3 were unsure about whether the e-learning parts were motivating and 28,2% did not feel motivated by it. Students were asked about their preferences regarding the individual tools: 53% of students liked doing the online exercises and 66% felt there was a lot of variety in terms of exercises. 38,4% believe that the online exercises allowed them to work more intensively than handwritten exercises. The majority (53,8%) of students enjoyed the forums. However, the chats were liked by only 38,4% of the students, ¼ of students were uncertain about them. As far as anxiety is concerned, 1/3 of all students felt less under pressure when doing online exercises compared to classroom activities. In terms of speaking tasks, a minority (38,4%) perceived those tasks as stressful. With regard to improving their skills, 73,6% of the participants agree that they improved their reading skills because of the e-learning. 71% believe that their writing skills have improved because of the e-learning component. 55,2% of the learners feel that their work with the online components resulted in better listening skills. A minority of the participants



(33,3%) believes that their speaking skills have improved due to e-learning components. 26,3% of the students feel more comfortable speaking German because of practising with the online components. Some students recognised that the online components encouraged learner autonomy. As one student commented, “e-learning is a form of “do it yourself” so it pushes me to practise.” Several students mentioned technical problems, which were time-consuming and frustrating. Some also stated that they struggled with learning how to use the platforms. As far as the workload is concerned, 20% commented that it was too high and 43,5% were unsure. In the qualitative part of the questionnaire, some students commented on the fact that some units on the *Learnlight* platform did not match well with the curriculum taught by their German tutor. Even though the pre-course-questionnaire showed that German was an important part of most of the students’ programmes (75,6%), some comments in the post-course questionnaires suggest that motivation was not very high amongst some students. One student pointed out that most Erasmus students do not see German as a priority and many only need a pass in the subject. The reasons for relatively low level of motivation could be that many students only stay at the host institution for one semester. As far as the tutors are concerned, they clearly thought the e-learning components were a beneficial addition to the course even though it was stressful at the beginning to learn how to handle the different components. The teachers felt that tracking students’ progress was especially time-consuming. In their opinion, it was at times difficult to motivate some students to make full use of the online components.

To sum up, the students’ reactions to the experience of a blended learning format for their language learning was mostly positive and the e-learning components were seen as beneficial, especially for their listening and reading skills. Many appreciated the opportunity to revise what had been dealt with in class and in general. The results did not show a considerable positive effect on students’ motivation; however, the majority still wants to benefit from a blended-learning format in their future language learning.

5. Discussion and implications

The study was aimed at identifying teachers’ and students’ perception and experience of blended learning in a specific language learning context. The results show that the majority of students perceived the blended-learning format as useful. Their initial attitude towards using computers in language learning stayed roughly the same. A considerable minority did not fully embrace the blended learning format. Likely reasons for this are, amongst other things, the range of components used, motivational issues, learners’ beliefs, technical issues as well as difficulty with developing learner autonomy.

One implication of this study is that it is advisable to share findings in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) research using student-friendly language to ensure students see the potential benefits of certain tools for their language development. For instance, only a minority of students in this study believes that written chats had a positive impact on their speaking skills. However, since language used in chat rooms is closer to oral than to written discourse [4], L2 speaking can be developed through written chats in the L2 [3]. Discussing this in class may influence students’ view of the efficacy of online components and their motivation to use them. Likewise, it is advisable to put a special emphasis on discussing blended learning and its potential value in general before and during the course. This could also encourage students’ reflection on their language learning. Discussing self-reliance and independence as learners may also lead to more learner autonomy. It is often taken for granted that students use new technology with ease. However, this pilot study has shown that students need to be trained thoroughly in how to use platforms and tools for blended-learning formats; even though they are digital natives, they still need guidance and help regarding technical and content issues. Training and support for both teachers and students is also necessary for the “normalisation” of CALL within language learning and teaching [1]. It is clear from the students’ answers that most students want a blended-learning concept that is closely interwoven with the conventional part of the course. This is likely to be important especially at beginners’ level to avoid being overwhelmed. A limitation of this study is that the sample was not very large (41 students) and the duration of the study was relatively short (15 weeks). Future research should assess the advantages and disadvantages of this blended learning module with larger populations and adapt the concept according to teachers’ and students’ perceptions and needs. The aim is to find the balance of instructional strategies that is specifically targeted at improving student learning [2].



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