

Teaching EAP in a Blended Environment: The MOODLE Experience

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Abstract: Abstract

The use of computers and the internet in education has significantly advanced the field of language teaching. Technology tools provide teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) with brand-new possibilities to enhance and diversify the teaching-learning process. Innovative teaching approaches coupled with specific web-based applications such as MOODLE have become ubiquitous elements of teaching languages in Israeli universities. The Tel Aviv University Division of Foreign Languages has developed and successfully employs blended MOODLE-based courses that integrate traditional face-to-face with online learning and teaching. Our aim is to share the experience of designing and teaching one of the English for Special Purposes (ESP)/English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses for the Health Sciences. The course is intended for advanced English level students of nursing who aim to improve their English for academic purposes in order to meet university language requirements and be able to apply their knowledge and skills in the academic and professional spheres. Compared to a traditional learning environment, a blended learning environment significantly promotes students' interest and facilitates active participation in numerous classroom activities (such as vocabulary enrichment exercises, quizzes, polls, forums, online tasks and video assignments) in addition to improving students' self-instruction skills. Evaluating the benefits of teaching EAP in a blended learning environment, we believe that the effective tools of the MOODLE software and its open and user-friendly nature enhance cooperation between teachers and students in their mutual efforts to improve academic achievements.

Key Words: language education, English for Academic purposes (EAP), MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), blended learning environment, nursing

Introduction

In the 21st century, the discipline of nursing has greatly advanced not only in clinical expertise but also in the development of a sound nursing theory. At the same time, a nursing shortage remains a worldwide issue. According to Ben Natan and Becker (2010) the nurse-to-patient ratio in Israel is one of the lowest in the Western world. To remedy the situation, the Israeli Ministry of Health, in close cooperation with the university-based nursing schools, offers academic programs to young people willing to pursue a career in nursing.

In Israeli higher education settings, the medium of instruction and communication is Hebrew; however, "students are required to read content-course bibliographies in English" (Spector-Cohen, Kirschner, & Wexler, 2001, p.367) at the onset of their undergraduate

programs. Therefore, reading comprehension courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have become a necessity. Furthermore, English reading proficiency for nurses is considered a requirement "to health care professionals in order to communicate efficiently and share information in the world today" (Chang, Chan, & Siren, 2013, p. 584). The Tel Aviv University Division of Foreign Languages has developed and successfully employs EAP courses for registered nurses (RN). The student population is represented by undergraduate students and working nurses interested in continuing their professional development. As Israel is a multicultural and multilingual country, it is interesting to note that for the majority of the student population, English is their third language, with native languages including Arabic, French, Russian, Amharic and Spanish. The teaching staff is represented by ESP / EAP instructors, both native and non-native speakers

of English.

Our aim is to share the experience of designing and teaching one of the English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses for the Department of Nursing, the Stanley Steyer School of Health Professions. The course, which was designed using the MOODLE (Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) platform, is intended for advanced level students of nursing who aim to improve their English for academic purposes in order to meet university language requirements and be able to apply their knowledge and skills in the academic and professional spheres.

The concept of a blended learning environment and the EAP advanced course design

Designing an academic profession-related course using the MOODLE platform necessitates defining the blended learning appropriate for our teaching purposes. Garrison & Kanuka (2004) suggest the following definition: “Blended learning is a student-centered approach to creating a learning experience whereby the learner interacts with other students, with the instructor, and with content through thoughtful integration of online and face-to-face environments” (p.96). Banados (2006) defines blended learning as:

A combination of technology and classroom instruction in a flexible approach to learning that recognizes the benefits of delivering some training and assessment online but also uses other modes to make up a complete training program which can improve learning outcomes and/or save costs. (p.534)

According to Hodgson (2010), blended learning is “the concept of integrating face-to-face instruction with technology-infused environments that are geared towards constructive interactions among peers and student-to-teacher” (p.1).

When reflecting on these and many other similar definitions, two things become obvious: first, the term *blended learning* has become a buzzword and is to remain in the university setting, and second, the most important feature of the concept of blended learning is that it “tends to recognize the value of both technology and f2f teaching” (Torrissi-Steele, 2011, p.362). As there is no consensus regarding a universal definition of a blended learning environment, and the existing definitions range from rather broad statements to quite specific ones, we formulated the following definition: a blended learning environment in a university setting means the integration of traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and learning (with web-supported elements) supplemented by online individual learning activities.

This view of a blended learning environment served as the foundation for designing our EAP English Course for Advanced Students of Nursing. The course is composed of content-based units made up of academic professional materials, with an emphasis on academic reading.

In the process of designing this course we focused on how to blend a traditional face-to-face learning approach with online sources, instruction and learning, and what optimal amount of blending is necessary for the creation of an effective blended environment. Based on our experience, we believe the proportion between face-to-face and online interactions should remain flexible, and depends on the course instructor and the course objectives. For this particular course we decided each blended unit should include:

Assignments learners can complete alone (reading articles, engaging in online activities).

Activities that benefit from interaction (class discussions of concepts, interpreting written results of assessments and assignments, getting feedback on written work, demonstrations and personal feedback) (Mohammad, 2009).

Course assessment is based on summative and formative types of assessment; the formative assessment is conducted through learning activities (e.g. online quizzes, MOODLE vocabulary quizzes), where students are responsible for unassisted personal learning. All learning materials are available for download from the university MOODLE-based web site. The course is scheduled for two ninety minute classes per week for fourteen weeks (one semester). The English Course for Advanced Nurses contains more units, articles, related worksheets and various online tasks than can be covered in a single course in order to provide teachers with a variety of materials from which they may select the materials most suitable for their students' needs.

The suggested academic articles “require a high level of linguistic proficiency and presuppose extensive background knowledge” (Spector-Cohen et al., 2001, p.368). The course includes various text types, such as empirical researches, historical reviews, problem-solution articles, editorials, case studies, and overview articles, with a focus on empirical research articles. In order to integrate the educational and professional needs and aims, topics are chosen, revised and reviewed at the beginning of each semester through consultations with faculty members and students of the Tel Aviv University Stanley Steyer School of Health Professions.

The place of the MOODLE software in the course design is worth mentioning separately, as this educational

tool presents a valuable asset for language instructors. Its open nature, user-friendly navigation and variety of tools enable teachers to shape an efficient learning environment suitable for any given course. Various MOODLE resources (text files, Power point files, video and audio files, links to websites, etc.), activity modules (assignments, forums, choice / poll activities, quizzes, etc.) as well as blocks providing extra information (latest news, quiz results, etc.) were brought together and developed for the purposes of this course. Having designed the course under discussion, and with several semesters of experience in teaching it, we became convinced that the course effectiveness depends on the right combination of teaching and learning items available on MOODLE, together with traditional face-to-face interactions and students' motivation to work on unassisted assignments. The suggested range of online and face-to-face interaction for our course varies between 65%-35% accordingly (see the course syllabus).

Syllabus and description of a unit

We present here the syllabus of the Advanced English Course for Students of Nursing to illustrate an example of a blended learning environment. To suggest how to effectively employ MOODLE materials, face-to-face interactions and unassisted learning, it is important to clarify some of the course components and present one of the course units – the unit on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Syllabus for Advanced English Course for Students of Nursing

1. Course Objectives: The main objective of the Advanced English course for Students of Nursing is to develop students' language competence in their university studies as well as at work. English for nurses is taught from the broad view of medicine and health care, enhancing language application through vocabulary acquisition and grammar. The course mainly focuses on academic reading, with special attention to writing, listening and speaking. Specific objectives include:

- Expansion of general academic vocabulary.
- Acquisition and expansion of professional medical and nursing vocabulary.
- Identifying extra – textual information.
- Reading various types of academic and quasi-academic texts.
- Development of bibliographic skills.
- Practice of listening skills.
- Practice of speaking skills – dialogs, discussions, role playing (pseudo-immersion experience), etc.
- Practice of writing skills as feedback on reading comprehension and listening.

The Advanced English course for Students of Nursing is based on a blend of online and face-to-face instruction methods. The texts and the majority of text related materials (i.e. vocabulary exercises and quizzes, forums, reading comprehension worksheets) are downloaded from the MOODLE course web site. Topics for discussions on specific issues, worksheets for teacher-led sessions to consolidate main points from diverse sources, as well as reading comprehension quizzes are provided during face-to-face instruction.

2. Course Requirements:

Course requirements	Mode of fulfilling requirements (face-to-face / online / unassisted work)	Weighted grade
Class Assignments	Reading comprehension quizzes, vocabulary quizzes (including online quizzes), online assignments, forums and homework.	35 %
Midterm Unseen Exam – empirical research	'Unseen' exam: 1.5 hours, with dictionaries based on a theme and text type covered in course readings.	15%
Unassisted Learning Group Project (ULGP)	Power point presentations, webpages, written reports, oral presentations, etc.	15%
Final Unseen Exam	'Unseen exam': 3 hours, with dictionaries based on a theme covered in the course readings.	35%

3. Bibliography:

1. Texts and materials for the course: To be downloaded from the course web site: <http://moodle.tau.ac.il>.
2. Dictionaries: Any dictionary, including electronic dictionaries. It is recommended to have a good English-English Learner's dictionary as back up. **Note: Scanning devices (Quicktionaries, palm pilots, laptops and tablets) are not allowed during the midterm and final exams.**

Unassisted Learning Group Project (ULGP)

One of the course requirements – the Unassisted Learning Group Project (ULGP) – needs clarification, for unlike class assignments and tests that assess students' individual achievements, the ULGP encourages peer-assisted work, sharing ideas and group creativity. Our students (in groups of 3-5) prepare Power Point

presentations on profession-related themes, utilizing various media tools (animation, graphics, videos), creating web pages, and producing their own short video clips. Two weeks before the end of the semester, the projects are uploaded to MOODLE for peer-review and submission to the instructor. This collaborative work increases their interest in communicating in English and thus serves the purpose of improving language skills. In exceptional cases teachers may provide help to struggling students by recommending certain websites, lists of professional journals, and offering some other practical assistance.

Forum activity as a significant element of the course unit

When compiling the unit materials for this course, particular attention was paid to the students' participation in forums as one of the individual learning activities. Forums are a popular form of involving students into online communication, and thus serve the purpose of facilitating the learning process. It has been noted that students share their opinions and emotions freely in the forum environment (Balçı, 2008, as cited in Geçer, 2013), and this online activity has a positive effect on their communication with their teachers and peers. Course MOODLE forums are based on the topics being discussed, and invite students to express their ideas, encouraging them to share their opinions in written form. Forum participation requires certain writing skills and acquaintance with netiquette, so before posting on the forum our students are expected to review and improve their knowledge of English grammar (sentence structure, use of connectors), bibliography conventions, and more. For instructions and practice, students are referred to a separate unit entitled: "Resources." One of the advantages of the forum as opposed to face-to-face class discussion is that it enables "total" student participation, which is particularly important in multicultural groups and large classes where better versed students may dominate class discussions.

Assessment criteria for the Unassisted Learning Group Project and forum activities are clearly delineated to the students in advance and include the level of topic reflection, appropriate use of references and citation ordering, forum interaction, and language command (vocabulary, grammar). In this out-of-class learning process, students employ different learning styles and have more opportunities to present their past experience and knowledge than in the traditional classroom environment.

PTSD unit description

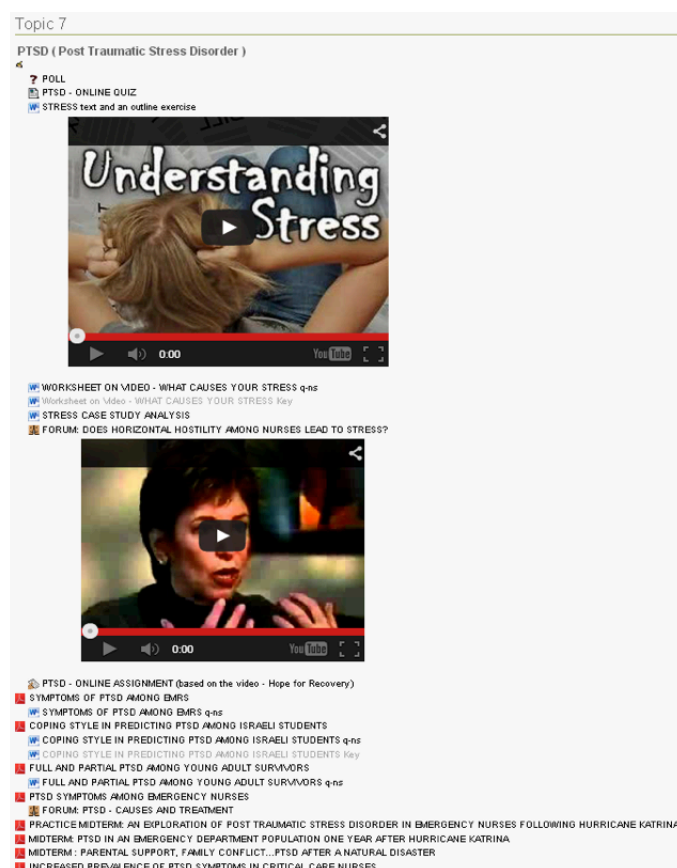
The PTSD unit consists of two parts: (1) general information on stress, including articles familiarizing students with the symptoms and consequences of stress (as stress is one of the primary causes of PTSD);

and (2) information and articles on full-blown PTSD.

The following introductory activities are conducted in class: an online poll and a short article on stress and its causes. The video *What Causes Your Stress? Understanding Stress* with an online task is assigned for homework. A discussion forum entitled: "Does Horizontal Hostility Among Nurses Lead To Stress?" ends the first part of this unit.

An online individual activity – a PTSD quiz – precedes the second video *Hope For Recovery*, introducing the topic of PTSD. We recommend showing the video during the lesson, followed by another online learning assignment. After reading and discussing several articles on stress and PTSD, e.g. *Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Emergency Medicine Residents* and *Copying Style in Predicting PTSD among Israeli Students*, a quiz is given to assess understanding of the research article structure, revise previously acquired reading comprehension strategies, and consolidate information from the online sources and course readings. Participation and posting on a PTSD forum is assigned for unassisted work. As this unit is studied in the middle of the semester, the Midterm Exam on PTSD concludes the first part of the course (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Screen shot of the unit on PTSD



Based on this detailed description and the suggested way of blending MOODLE resources, activities and face-to-face interactions for this unit, it may be seen that

effective teaching in a blended environment may be achieved by the appropriate selection, compatibility and combination of teaching materials and teaching methods together with the language instructor's perception of his/her new role and duties in such an environment.

Instructor's role in a blended environment

The role of an EAP course instructor in a blended environment deserves special mention as it dramatically differs from that of the traditional "sage on the stage" transmitting theories, facts and concepts to students who are mainly "information receivers" to a "guide-on-the-side" who is able to construct a stimulating blended environment and become their students' collaborative partner and adviser in searching for information and in their learning process. Our perception of the instructor's role in a blended environment discussed in this paper mostly supports previous research stating that "the nature of teaching, roles and workload distribution changes as instructors teach in blended and/or online courses" (Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2002; Young, 2002 as cited in Redmond, 2011). In addition to the requirements and duties of a language instructor in a traditional university teaching environment, this new concept of the instructor's role implies, among other tasks, deciding on the type and quantity of online resources to be included in each course unit, determining the appropriate blending of these resources with traditional in-and out-of-class activities, as well as assisting the student in orienting and navigating him/herself within the web space.

Developing and employing online course materials requires a sufficient level of computer literacy on the language instructors' side, which is a relatively new component in teaching as a whole. In general, Israeli students have a good command of computer skills. We have found it useful to provide university support of faculty training to support technology-enhanced learning. Thus, the Tel Aviv University Division of Foreign Languages conducts regular MOODLE workshops, with positive results.

One of the realities our language instructors face is that a blended learning environment demands an individualized approach, not only to each student but also to each student community (each community being a group of about 40 students) taught during the semester. Increased teacher flexibility in the lesson planning and task assignment is necessary for our students of nursing, since most of them are older than the general student population, work night shifts, and have families.

Although our students' intrinsic motivation towards their studies is embedded in the concept of nursing

and is encouraged by the department members, a certain degree of compromise is appropriate when assigning large amounts of work for self-learning so as not to "overload" students, as this may sometimes lead to decreased motivation. Thus, language instructors should pay special attention when selecting assignments for homework.

Whereas some previous research has indicated that "faculty members tend to perceive a lack of student motivation in blended courses" (Ocak, 2010), our experience supports the view expressed by Derntl and Motschnig-Pitrik (2005, as cited in Mehmet, 2010) who argue that blended teaching increased students' motivation to participate in courses, compared to non-blended teaching).

At the same time, a "cookie-cutter" approach and a "wait and see" attitude seem unsuitable for this student population. Moreover, timelines in the blend of online and face-to-face environments may require flexibility, especially regarding assignment submission. However, the risk of procrastination by less disciplined students increases and should not be ignored. As the designers and coordinators of this course, we suggest that language instructors working with students of nursing do not underestimate these issues.

One of the major concerns of language course instructors in blended environments is the growing risk of academic dishonesty. It is obvious that students in these environments have more opportunities for seeking information and sharing which may lead to more cases of dishonesty. Furthermore, it is increasingly difficult for instructors to seek and apply methods to prevent cheating. Dishonesty in higher education settings seems to be on the rise, becoming a global problem, and the issue of the teacher's role in preserving academic integrity in the current technological reality is taking on new forms. Since nursing is considered to be one of the most honest professions, with the highest ethical standards (Saad, 2006 as cited in Arhin & Jones, 2009), "one would assume that academic dishonesty would be nonexistent in nursing programs" (Arhin & Jones, 2009, p. 711). However, as practice shows, a growing number of nursing students participate in different kinds of cheating behavior, even when realizing the moral wrongness of their deeds. So, to ensure integrity we suggest that language instructors in similar situations develop and administer multiple assessment methods, combining traditional forms of measuring performance along with alternative ones, suitable for specific blended course assignments.

It is widely recognized that teaching a language is much broader than simply improving students' language proficiency, for teaching a language means teaching a

culture. Course reading materials from various sources published in English include articles on cross-cultural aspects and ethical medical / nursing problems (e.g. organ donation dilemmas), acquainting students of nursing with culture-related health care and nursing issues in such countries as the USA, Canada, Great Britain, China, Singapore, Turkey and India. Thus, language instructors should be aware of the significant cultural differences in medical / nursing practices and display cultural sensitivity when teaching in a multicultural environment.

Conclusion

Compared to the traditional learning environment, which characterized the TAUEAP advanced course for students of nursing in the past, the new blended learning environment significantly promotes students' interest, facilitates active participation in numerous activities (vocabulary enrichment exercises, online quizzes, polls, forums, online tasks and video assignments) and improves students' self-instruction skills. Opinions on the blended environment expressed by our colleagues and anonymous student feedback received at the end of every semester over the past several years seem to demonstrate overall higher levels of motivation and satisfaction in both teaching and learning. However, this assessment requires additional research.

A blended environment based on the MOODLE platform provides language instructors with numerous significant advantages. The following is a list of the most effective and beneficial advantages pertaining to the EAP course:

- availability of numerous online resources
- provision of a simple, clear view of all learning activities and resources for every unit
- uploading new articles and newly developed activities during the course
- flexibility in assignment submission, task assessment and grading
- tracking student activity to see how much time students allocate to different tasks and activities online
- easier control over teaching and learning pace
- dealing successfully with the increased number of students
- 24/7 accessibility for students and instructors
- providing instructors with a better opportunity to know their students' stronger and weaker points, both online and in the classroom

Our experience of teaching a blended EAP course for students of nursing using MOODLE software shows that integrating traditional face-to-face classroom teaching

and learning (with web-supported elements) with online individual learning activities can significantly improve the quality of teaching and learning, provide alternative modes of student involvement and enhance different aspects of the material studied by combining background knowledge and reflection, action and theory. Evaluating the benefits of teaching EAP in a blended learning environment, we believe that the effective tools of the MOODLE software and its open and user-friendly nature contribute to the cooperation between teachers and students in their mutual efforts to improve academic achievements.

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