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The Use of Blended Learning in EFL (Writing Skills): A Case for Rosetta Stone Software

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Abstract

The purpose of education at Moscow Aviation Institute (MAI) is to qualify highly trained professionals who are ready to communicate and also take part in scientific sphere. We have created an English language course that blends in person instruction enhanced with wiki interactive tools. This study tests Rosetta stone software on MAI students' writing skills. We decided to find the difference between the results of blended learning approach as alternative to traditional course of EFL, especially we were focused on the progress in writing skills. We decided to start this hybrid course for some reasons: to encourage the students of MAI to read, speak and especially write properly; to find new ways of interaction between the professors and the students. Rosetta stone blended course is one of the key online language learning programs of educational success nowadays. Hence, we designed a treatment using Rosetta Stone software to examine its effect on EFL students' writing skills at MAI. Our department of linguistics and translation is well-equipped with modern personal computers, web cameras etc. A sample of 48 technical first-year students started a language course at MAI. 24 students represented the control group, and 24 students represented the experimental group. The control and experimental groups were taught by the same program. Throughout the course, the learners working within the framework of traditional paradigm followed the typical communicative approach routine. The participants of the experimental group were instructed to view the material posted on Rosetta Stone platform and to do extra homework several times a week. Among the benefits of course we can name: accessibility of materials, students' desire to study and to test something new, an opportunity to study whenever and wherever they want, ability to concentrate indoors home, progress in writing and other skills. The analysis revealed that the experimental group outstriped the control group with traditional way of education. In conclusion, we can say, that blended learning can successfully improve the progress in writing skills of EFL studies at MAI.

Keywords: higher education, EFL, blended learning, Rosetta Stone software, writing.

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Introduction

The progress in modern life in different spheres and also lot of opportunities to use different computer technologies in education gave us a unique lucky chance to improve teaching and learning (Felix, 2003). Contemporary scientists say that technology is a base and the future of teaching and learning.

The blended learning method appeared several years ago. Different countries started use it during university lessons (Jusoff, 2009). Pupils and students approved such kind of innovations too and used them with great pleasure. Such kind of classical lessons with combination of computer platforms are not boring, they arouse imagination, desire to study, interest. Just the same situation you can observe in Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University) (MAI). The target of our university is to qualify extremely trained professionals with good communication skills and which are able take part in scientific sphere. Such kind of strategy has led our professors to use online platforms and different new computer programs and learning environments for progress in studying (Wu, Tennyson & Hsia, 2010). My colleagues were impressed greatly with blended learning approach (hybrid learning). Such kind of approach is a combination of classical classroom lessons and online lessons (mostly at home) (So & Brush, 2008). Frankly speaking, we recommend greatly hybrid learning. Survey results revealed that students liked online tools very much. That's why nowadays many universities all over the world have started to use blended learning approach as alternative to traditional model of education (Wu, Tennyson & Hsia, 2010) and our university is not an exception.

The lack of research upon the achievement and the success of blended learning approach have forced us to carry out an experiment and to write this article. Thus, the target of our scientific work was to research the effect of hybrid course organization on the progress in writing skills of EFL studies at MAI.

Developing writing skills is one of the core components of EFL studies at university which is essential for information acquisition and international professional communication of future specialists. Writing skills are a key weak link (Gehard, 1996). We understand also that writing is most likely one of the most significant and difficult skills (Carrell, 1989). That's why we decided to examine an effect of hybrid learning especially on writing skills.

The abovementioned importance of writing for EFL students makes it crucial for EFL students to have good writing proficiency.

Therefore, a question arises to what extent developing writing proficiency with the help of e-learning is possible, if at all. In connection to this, we can say that hybrid learning is noticeable key to successful education taking into account both traditional teacher-driven classroom setting with proven techniques of teaching writing and technology-assisted out-of-class learners' individual experience.

To check the hybrid approach with Rosetta Stone platform improves writing skills, students offline and online activities need to be monitored.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The target of our research is to test and match the results of hybrid technology (on Rosetta Stone platform) and traditional learning approach on the development of writing skills.

Literature review

The theory of blended learning says that the educational system can combine the elements of classical in class education with computer technologies and online platforms. For example, Bekisheva T. G. in the article "Teaching foreign monologue speech to students of technical higher education in terms of blended learning" deals with the peculiarities of the organization of hybrid methodology which improves the progress of monologue speech proficiency of students studying in a technical higher education. She defines the content of training, approaches and principles, and successfully develops a set of exercises placed in the electronic environment. The outcome of experimental training proved the effectiveness of using the developed methodology for teaching technical higher education students of monologue speech skills in terms of blended learning. The author developed an electronic course to work in terms of blended learning in the discipline "Foreign Language for Academic Mobility Programs (English)". It includes: 3 modules for training; a technological map of the training course; the training schedule, the rating-plan of training (Bekisheva, 2018).

We also analyzed the article written by the professor Shaykina O.I. from the Tomsk Polytechnic University. This article describes effective and unusual hybrid education in English language teaching process. The study is devoted to new modern technologies. Her scientific work describes different learning treatments on interactive platforms. (Shaykina, 2015).

Nowadays a lot of universities and colleges all over the world have started to establish hybrid learning and our university is not exception, too.

Methodology

We are going to describe a hybrid English language learning university course we are teaching for the freshmen average technical students at MAI. Then we are going to check our results and make a conclusion. At the beginning we tested the entry level of our students' English language. The results showed that their level was between A2 (pre-intermediate) and B1 (intermediate) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2002).

Rosetta stone is one of the key online language learning programs of educational success nowadays. The course provides online practice in standard English. Providing sufficient practice and training this software might have a beneficial trend on learners' perceptive attainments. Hence, we designed a treatment using Rosetta Stone software to examine its effect on EFL students' writing skills at MAI.

We decided to choose this platform and this hybrid course, because of three aspects:

1. To encourage the students to read, speak and especially write.

2. To find some new extraordinary additional opportunities for motivation and teaching, to vary methods.

During classical offline lessons, students read, retell, discuss, write essays, outline texts, answer the questions, make projects on the topic of their scientific direction, translate articles from newspapers and magazines according to their specialty, watch films. Moreover, they do some additional individual tasks. They continue their classwork at home with the help of Rosetta Stone online platform. The instructor explained that Rosetta Stone material was supplementary to the in-class EFL studies at the university, especially to writing skills improvement. Students connect advantages of using Rosetta Stone with a freedom to choose when, where and how long to study.

In the wiki the students make different tasks too, complete various tables, write compositions, do listening, analyze their mistakes. The duty of the students was to work with Rosetta Stone platform at least once in two days. The professor has to check the attendance, frequency and quantity of performing tasks.

Results

We did an experiment to examine and match the results of blended learning technology (on Rosetta Stone platform) and classical model on the progress of writing skills. A selection of 48 technical first-year students started a language course at MAI. 24 students represented the control group, and 24 students represented the experimental group. The control and experimental groups were taught by the same program.

Learners were initially tested using the DIALANG test (https://dialangweb.lancaster.ac.uk/) to ensure they all exhibit the same level of language proficiency. As majority of university applicants are approximately of Pre-Intermediate CEFR level, we decided to focus our study on learners whose language skills are of A2 level, which corresponds to Pre-Intermediate. DIALANG scale helped to identify the level of each skill. Despite having the development of some skills at a slightly higher or lower levels (B1 or A1), all the experiment participants showed their skills development at A2 level. Throughout the course, we tested the development of skills (Writing, Use of English, Listening, Speaking, and Reading) once a month 3 times. For this purpose, a standard Cambridge English: Key test was used as it corresponds to the A2 level. We did not take the aspect of students' motivation into account since English is a mandatory subject and is not the specialty of these learners. All the participants signed an informed agreement for participation in the project.

The control group received only traditional education, when the experimental group received in-class instruction and Rosetta Stone supplementation.

We taught all the groups inside the class by the same program to ensure that they received the same knowledge. It covered the prescribed two modules for the semester. Each of the two modules was allocated seven weeks (approximately 14 academic hours). Throughout the course the learners working within the framework of traditional paradigm followed the typical communicative approach routine, writing lessons being a significant part of course organization. During such lessons learners were given all the necessary instruction as well as sufficient amount of pre-writing exercise followed by the writing itself. Besides, some parts of the lessons were allocated to grammar, pronunciation, speaking and reading. Grammar part is also very important for successful writing. That is why we pay a special attention to the grammar side of writing.

The participants of the experimental group were instructed to do homework 4-6 times a week.

Testing with the Cambridge English: Key test was set three times during the term. The test consists of three papers: Reading and Writing, Listening, and Speaking.

Discussions

To address the first research question, we see that learners receiving additional practice by working with online software show better performance in all main writing subskills.

Whereas in the case of control group the data fluctuates, showing first a significant rise but then recovering at a lower level, experimental group shows higher results in the test. This trend stays steady for all three tests.

To sum up, we see that learners receiving additional practice by working with Rosetta Stone software show better performance in all main writing subskills.

To address the second research question, we devised a short questionnaire for the learners to complete. First, the students were questioned to refer to their learning process during the semester and indicate how much time they typically had spent on doing their home task set and what is their attitude to hybrid learning. 11 participants of a control group and 12 learners from experimental group took part in a survey. The research shows that the learners mostly spent 2-3 hours per week on completing their home task regardless of whether it is set online or in a traditional form of extra exercises in a workbook.

Then, the students were asked if the home task set had been of interest to them. Most respondents of control group (90%) indicated interesting home task. 66,7% of control group respondents also noted that they would want to use online platforms for home practice. At the same time 59,5% of respondents from experimental group were definitely against using online platforms as a leading mode of language teaching. This can be explained by the learners' comments on the difficulties they had faced during the semester:

-        repetitive and boring kinds of tasks (64,7%)

-        lack of time for doing home task (48,6%)

-        technical difficulties: poor sound, poor voice recognition, etc. (48,6%).

Conclusion

In conclusion we'd like to say that all the participants had a positive general impression of the experiment. That's why we decided to continue our work in this direction, improve our weaknesses and may be to step up our experiment. Overall, the attitude of the students to the described course was rather positive and encouraged us to work on improving it.

The first research question addressed the effect of wiki (Rosetta Stone platform) on the students' writing skills. The experiment showed that all the students from all over the tested groups revealed a positive trend in writing exercises. The experimental group with hybrid learning scheme outran the control group. The results were confirmed statistically. In the issuance, it can be emphasized that hybrid learning is able to

advance the progress in reading, speaking and writing skills, vocabulary and grammar at the university. That's why, we can announce a beneficial trend of online Rosetta Stone platform on writing and reading comprehension skills.

Thus, we recommend to conduct similar investigations with a larger scope, in both sampling and duration, not only on writing skills, but also on grammar, reading comprehension and other language aspects to corroborate the current findings and increase their potential generalizability.

Traditional learning can benefit from using Rosetta Stone software in developing learners' receptive skills. However, this software cannot completely substitute traditional classroom work due to the lack of "live" interaction.

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