

Combining Face-to-Face and Online Learning of the Future Teachers of Foreign Languages

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Rezumat: În prezent, metoda de învățare „eLearning” devine din ce în ce mai populară. Universitățile din lumea întreagă oferă cursuri online menite să faciliteze procesul de învățare. Totuși, este inestimabilă prezența unui dascăl cu experiență care este întotdeauna gata să-ți ofere sprijin, în special când este vorba de învățarea unei limbi străine. Articolul de față își propune să analizeze avantajele de predare a unei limbi străine folosind metoda eLearning. În opinia autoarei, varianta optimă ce ar rezulta cu o însușire mult mai bună a materialului, este de a combina contactul direct dintre profesor – elev și învățarea online.

Cuvinte-cheie: suport online, învățare online, proces de învățare, limbă.

Abstract: Nowadays, online learning has gained popularity. Universities all over the world offer online support and direction from experienced teachers to facilitate the students' learning process. The present article aims at analyzing the advantages of teaching a foreign language with E-Learning support. In the author's opinion combining face-to-face and online learning would make the teaching process more successful and satisfying both for the students and the teacher.

Key-words: online support, online learning, learning process, language.

The technological progress facilitated peoples' lives in many ways; moreover, it has become an influential part in the educational system in the new millennium. Nowadays, teachers and students use more and more technological resources in the classroom which do not only help bring diversity to the lesson but also aim at facilitating the process of learning. It is a way of arousing students' interest and motivating them to learn by providing true opportunities for inspirational and meaningful learning.

However, there are concerns that E-Learning might turn into a sterile experience of clicking within a labyrinth of links. This is why the best solution would be to combine face-to-face learning and E-Learning, to gather the students both inside the classroom and in the virtual reality. We assume that only a harmonious blending of the two can help students improve their knowledge. At the same time, we believe that face-to-face teaching is still the best way to achieve great results, as the physical contact and the surrounding environment can help enhance students' learning process. In our opinion, E-Learning should be considered as a support to the traditional method of teaching especially in the training of foreign language students.

According to *National strategy concerning the employment policies*, the main aim of the higher institutions is to 'train a sufficient number of highly qualified specialists' [4, p. 6], who will be able to answer the demands of the competitive market. Nowadays a highly qualified teacher of a foreign language should not only master the language and apply the latest approaches in methodology, but also use the technological resources inside and outside the classroom.

There is even a prognosis that teachers will have better chances for employment⁵⁵. And a teacher trained to use the modern technologies in the classroom will be able to answer the latest demands in the labor market. Thus, teacher training students need to learn how to use technology in their future teaching process.

As, the rapid diffusion of computer acquisition and Internet access is well known, online education is inevitable. However, it should be combined with the classical approach to teaching. It is commonly acknowledged that 'students generally like to have a sense of belonging' [2, p. 3]. That is why a teacher tries to create a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom to make the learning process more appealing. Yet, there are specialists who believe that this sense of belonging is not a paramount factor if the student is committed and really wants to learn. We argue that this may be an impediment in the student's better understanding of the studied material; it may hamper him from a quicker assimilation of the material.

Kaye Thorne, for example, believes that blended learning is the best solution: *Blended learning is the most logical and natural evolution of our learning agenda. It suggests an elegant solution to the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals. It represents an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning. It can be supported and enhanced by using the wisdom and one-to-one contact of personal coaches* [3, p. 2].

One question that arouses is: How can be blended learning applied in Moldova at the Foreign Language Faculty? One way to do it is to participate in the WETEN project whose aim is 'to undertake an analysis of the pedagogic traditions, skills and competencies required for higher education teachers in accordance with European e-Learning strategy and e-Bologna action'⁵⁶.

The platform Moodle used as technical support can be of great help in creating online courses, seminars, tests, etc. Thus, the students may access the lecture every time they need it. Moreover, the information there is far more accurate than the notes they take during the lecture. Besides, the students might consult the contents of the lecture before actually attending it. This will allow having a more interactive lecture where students will engage in a discussion with the teacher concerning the covered issues.

It can also be of great help in choosing the best E-sources to consult. Sometimes, the students get lost in the variety of information on the web. The teacher could recommend the best ones which will help the students save a lot of time (a useful tool in sharing links might be to create an account on netvibes.org). The Moodle platform can also facilitate the teacher's work, especially when it comes to checking and grading tests.

Another appealing feature is the possibility to create different forums related to the subject matter of the attended lectures. The teacher could not only assist but also moderate the discussion which will have a more informal character. The students may feel much more comfortable in front of computers, discussing some topic as if they were socializing on the net. In this case, the physical absence of the teacher might be more benefic as it will create a more relaxed atmosphere.

Yet, not every institution can be part of the project. That is why teachers should consider other ways to get in virtual contact with their students. Thus, they could become members of the blogosphere, by creating their own edublogs the aim of which is to serve as an idea box where everybody is invited to share their opinions concerning how to learn, teach a foreign language. Being a teacher of English myself I found it very challenging, but at the same time interesting to work with students via a blog.

⁵⁵<http://anofm.md/Alte>, p. 26.

⁵⁶<http://www.weten.org/content/about-project>

The tools offered by wordpress are most suited for my educational goals. Apart from having the possibility of creating several categories where to publish different types of posts, a teacher can create several pages to which the students might have access any time they need some precise information. Depending on the types of subjects the teacher may create several pages. For example, while teaching English as a foreign language it is worth creating pages devoted to grammar and phonetics. These pages are to help the students whenever they come across some grammar or phonetic difficulties.

The advantage of having such pages is that they can be updated all the time in accordance with the students' needs. It allows the teacher to emphasize some significant grammar or phonetic rules, which will help the students understand them better. In their turn, the students could always access them whenever they have doubts. Moreover, although it is a static page it does not mean it cannot be interactive. The students may ask for specific explanation by posting their questions in the comment section.

Course notes could also be published on a static page. Thus, the students will always be able to find the basic information on a specific subject there. They could be encouraged to engage in discussing it in the comment section.

When it comes to posts they can be classified in categories so that every student keeps track of the specific post they might be particularly interested in. In my opinion, by posting their assignments there, a teacher can always highlight the mistakes they make. Actually, it is an interactive way of error correction. The students can explain what exactly they meant, and ask for explanation in case they disagree or do not understand what the teacher tries to say.

At the same time, it is not meant to be a necessarily teacher assessment. It can also be used as a tool for peer assessment. It is known that especially in our culture it is very difficult to have this type of assessment in the classroom. Sometimes, the students are afraid to criticize their peers as they might be misunderstood. By encouraging them to post comments on a peer's assignment, the student will avoid making the same mistake. If not sure he could always involve the teacher in his assessment and ask for advice. At the same time, he makes the first steps in evaluating a certain piece of work, a skill which will be much needed in his future career as a teacher.

The teacher may also have categories where he could post some thought-provoking issues and encourage the students to contribute with their own ideas. It will boost the students' creative thinking and enlarge their horizons. By sharing ideas they will come to a better understanding of a concrete problem.

Another software application to be used is 'Skype'. It allows its users to make voice and video calls and chat over the Internet. Thus, a teacher may appoint the time for a discussion session in a virtual classroom. This is interesting for students and it motivates them more to take part in the discussion. Skype is also great when a student cannot come to classes but has the possibility to virtually attend it. It would spare him the effort to understand the subject on his own.

It is well-known that a PowerPoint Presentation is another technical tool to be used at the lesson. However, our reality is that we do not have the possibility to display them on a big screen. The e-world can be of help in this respect. Apart from inserting these presentations in the blog, there is the option to post them online on the world's largest community for sharing presentations <http://www.slideshare.net/>.

Slideshare can be used by the students themselves. They can create their own accounts and post their presentations there. They can comment on each other presentation and suggest improvements. At the same time, they are learning something new from their peers. It is an on-going collaboration which is meant to help them acquire the necessary skills in their future work with their students (i.e. they will understand how difficult it is to assess a student's creative work, to collaborate, to communicate, etc.).

As seen all these activities are done as a support material to the face-to-face teaching. It is not enough to sit in front of a computer in order to learn a foreign language and acquire the necessary communicative skills. The physical presence of a teacher, his involvement and inspiration are still the best in achieving great results. However, they can be improved by means of the technological support. Thus, the combination of the face-to-face learning and E-Learning is the best option in training foreign language teachers. William Arthur Ward once said: 'The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires'. We cannot but agree with this quote as, indeed, a machine cannot inspire, and it is still the human being with feelings and attitudes who can do it. At the same time, the virtual world can enhance what a teacher performs at the lesson. It can boost their already acquired skills and motivate them to want more.

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4. http://anofm.md/Strategia_nationala