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Digitally-Assisted Blended Teaching and Learning of Ukrainian: What Do Instructors Think?

Abstract English

The blended-learning model, a combination of traditional face-to-face and student self-study online learning, continues to attract the attention of scholars and practitioners of language teaching. Our study is a contribution to the growing body of literature on the implementation and use of this model in a foreign language classroom. We focus on beginners' Ukrainian classrooms in which the blended-learning resources from *PodorozhiUA.com* have been implemented by a number of instructors of different programs. The study explores instructors' perspectives of their experiences with the model, and their views on the effects of the model on students' learning, instructors' teaching practices, and relationships in the learning community. The study takes a qualitative approach with data collected via focus group discussions. By empirically researching instructors' views, the analysis provides valuable insights into the field of digitally-assisted language learning and instruction.

Keywords: blended learning, blended language learning, Ukrainian language, instructors' perspectives

Abstract Ukrainian

Модель змішаного навчання, яка поєднує традиційні аудиторні заняття та самостійні онлайн-заняття, продовжує привертати увагу вчених і педагогів-практиків у навчанні іноземних мов. Метою нашого дослідження є вивчення цієї моделі, її впровадження та використання у навчанні іноземних мов. Ми зосереджуємося на початковому рівні навчання української як іноземної із залученням ресурсу *PodorozhiUA.com*, в основі якого лежить змішана модель, і який використовували ряд викладачів різних програм. Ми вивчаємо, як викладачі сприймають цю модель, їх досвід та методику роботи з нею, як модель впливає на вивчення студентами мови, взаємини між студентами, а також між викладачами і студентами. У дослідженні використовується якісний підхід до обробки даних, зібраних за допомогою фокус-групи. Результати дослідження роблять важливий внесок у розвиток методики викладання іноземних мов за допомогою цифрових технологій.

Ключові слова: змішане навчання, змішане навчання мови, українська мова, точка зору викладачів

1. Introduction

This study is inspired by our continuing interest in implementing digital tools and technologies into the language classroom and questioning the suitability, challenges, advantages, and disadvantages of these tools in specific contexts. This project focuses on the technology-assisted blended language learning model [BLL], which is a combination of face-to-face [F2F] teaching and learning and a substantial digital self-learning component. The model, which has been described as “a transformational force in education” (Dziuban et al., 2014, p. 328, cited in Grgurović, 2017) continues to attract attention in scholarship.

Scholarly literature on blended learning [BL] in language teaching and learning continues to grow, with quantitative research dominating the field. However, studies of instructors' and



learners' perceptions and attitudes, particularly qualitative studies, are still quite limited. As part of a larger project, we have explored learners' attitudes towards BLL, demonstrating the overall reassuring results and suggesting some lessons learned based on student attitudes towards the model (Nedashkivska, 2019). The present focus is on instructors' perceptions of teaching via BLL, which we have not previously considered. We believe that perceptions act as powerful motivating factors that shape the actions and behaviors of instructors, and they therefore constitute determining elements in the successful implementation of any pedagogical innovation such as, in this case, digitally-assisted BLL.

In order to explore instructors' perceptions of teaching via BLL, we intend to address the following research questions:

- What are the instructors' general perceptions of BLL?
- How does BLL affect the students' learning process?
- How does BLL affect teaching practices?
- How does BLL affect relationships in the learning community?

2. Institutional and Research Context

In the fall of 2015, a beginners' Ukrainian language course at the University of Alberta transitioned from a traditional F2F to a BLL course. This change was prompted by students' requests on the motivation survey (Nedashkivska & Sivachenko, 2017), in which students expressed a desire for a course with less class time commitment¹ and the integration of more technologically enhanced tools and activities, especially those geared at self-study, into language learning. In students' view, technology had the potential to provide them with additional communicative practice, potentially securing overall success in their learning. As a response to students' requests, researchers developed a new technologically enhanced e-textbook, *PodorozhiUA* (Nedashkivska & Sivachenko, n.d.), which incorporated a BLL model. The proposed BL enabled a move toward more learner-centered practices and allowed the class model to switch from five F2F hours to three in-class and three online sessions (Sivachenko & Nedashkivska, 2017), thus providing students with more flexibility.

To assess the effects of the BLL model on learning Ukrainian, we systematically surveyed our students (see below). Our present focus is on the Ukrainian language instructors' perceptions of the model.

¹ Please note that at the beginners' level, a traditional foreign language classroom at the University of Alberta would require 5 hours of formal class time, which was often the reason many students avoided enrolling in beginner-level language courses including Ukrainian.

3. Blended language learning and instructors' perceptions of the model

The concept of BLL began appearing in scholarship around 2000 (Güzer & Caner, 2014) with varying and evolving definitions. In this study, we understand BL as the “thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96), with the intent “to create a learning environment that functions as a seamless whole” (Mizza & Rubio, 2020, p. 11). This optimal combination of F2F and online learning has a great potential to balance, build on, enhance, and strengthen the two learning and teaching modes (Mizza & Rubio, 2020). Even though F2F time is reduced, the right balance, cross-integration of resources, and complementary nature of F2F and online components foster and facilitate collaborations in the learning community. In short, a BLL model that integrates “online and traditional F2F class activities in a planned and pedagogically sound manner” (Mizza & Rubio, 2020, p. 24), enables “a formal teaching and learning experience that includes a multiaccess, balanced, guided, and monitored instructional environment” (ibid., p. 24).

Research explorations of BL in a language classroom continue to be timely and relevant. Previous studies of BL have identified some of its benefits as improved student learning outcomes and performance (Chenoweth & Murday, 2003; Rubio, 2014; Scida & Saury, 2006); accessibility and reduced costs (Scida & Saury, 2006; Bijeikienė et al., 2011); greater student control over learning (Gimeno Sanz, 2009); and support of different learning styles (Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2013). Some disadvantages of BLL have also been noted, including a lack of connection between in-class and out-of-class learning spaces (Chenoweth et al., 2006), decreased student control over learning (Bijeikienė et al., 2011), heavier workloads for students, and students' inadequate computer skills (Bueno-Alastuey, 2009a, 2009b).

Students' perceptions have also been addressed in search of ways of enhancing the learning experiences via BLL. Scholars have focused on individual learner characteristics and learning styles (Isabelli, 2013; Carr, 2014); learners' levels of language study (Cubillos, 2007); and students' appreciation of specific course-tools that enable a learning community online by promoting student engagement and reducing anxiety (Enkin & Mejías-Bikandi, 2017). Our own explorations contributed to our understanding of student satisfaction, engagement, and perception of progress in BLL (Nedashkivska, 2022 & 2019), and student engagement in a remote, including BLL environment (Sivachenko & Nedashkivska, 2021).

Studies of instructors' perspectives, particularly in a language classroom, continue to be somewhat limited. Instructors' generally positive perceptions have been noted (Isabelli, 2013). Scholars have addressed instructors' views of the effectiveness of technology and pedagogical matters in adapting to BLL, as well as shifts in the instructor's roles in the model (Anderson, 2018; Mizza & Rubio, 2020; Shelley et al., 2013). Some have noted the improvement of instructor-student interaction (Yang, 2014); however, others outlined challenges in establishing a learning community in BLL (Gleason, 2013; Shelley et al., 2013; Yang, 2014), with a reduced student motivation, particularly in their participation in online activities, as a major concern (Bijeikienė et al., 2011). Studies underscore the importance of connection between F2F and online lessons, with the online component seen by students as an essential part of the course (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Grgurović, 2011), alongside the crucial element of instructor training (Comas-Quinn,

2011). In short, although the results of previous studies generally favor BLL, these discussions remain somewhat contradictory.

This article aims to further our understanding of instructors' perspectives of BLL, a digitally-enhanced teaching and learning environment, using Ukrainian BLL as a case study.

4. Method: Procedures and data collection

The data, with the focus on the instructors' perceptions of BLL, were collected at the end of the winter semester of 2022. First, we collected instructors' responses to close- and open-ended survey questions geared at soliciting instructors' candid opinions on their experiences with the BLL model.² Five instructors from different educational institutions, who either have used in the past, or currently use, the BLL resource under discussion in their teaching, completed the survey. The results of the survey were used as a springboard for collecting the primary, qualitative, focus-group data. Namely, the focus group questions were informed by considerations that emerged from the survey data, which we were able to group into four areas of focus. These include the instructors' perceptions of i) the BLL model in general and suggestions for its use; ii) the model's effects on student learning; iii) the model's effects on teaching practices; and iv) the model's effects on relationships in the learning community.³

Four of the five instructors volunteered to participate in the focus group interview, which was carried out via the Zoom distance platform and lasted for ninety minutes. The focus group interview was led by both authors, with a research assistant taking notes. The transcript, produced by Zoom, was analyzed independently by each of the three researchers. First, each of us identified the emerging themes in the data set. Second, we compared and cross-examined these themes, thereby narrowing down the results into thematic clusters, which we present in the analysis below. We acknowledge our limited scope of data, which is the reality of Ukrainian as a foreign language program. Nevertheless, we believe that our analysis provides empirical input into digitally-enhanced BLL, its implementation, its reception, and its potentials for the field of language teaching and learning.

5. Results

To capture instructors' perspectives on teaching via BLL, we analyzed the data obtained from the focus group interviews. Though the focus group questions were structured around the four categories noted above, we would like to present the results with respect to success factors and some challenges, associated with the integration of the model into beginners' Ukrainian language courses. Instructors' responses were coded to find common themes (Huberman & Miles, 1994), which are presented in the sections below.

² Survey questions are available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/17JdxxoNwVUK180ajETzx8hQdpwDBw2B/view?usp=sharing>

³ Instructors' focus group questions are available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1enT8psldBqkbH482Dib2CQPxz5rhlwll/view?usp=sharing>

5.1 BLL success factors

The data revealed that instructors' perceptions of BLL correspond to our understanding of the model. Specifically, Participant 3 (P3 henceforth) viewed it as a combination of "F2F meetings and an online component that [students] complete at their own pace at home, which prepares them for the next F2F meeting." Instructors also pointed out that BLL is "the best way to study Ukrainian for beginners and immerse them in the language" (P2), and that "after you have tried BLL, you will never return [to the traditional format]" (P4). In order to further explore these positive perceptions of BLL, the analysis in this section will focus on success factors identified by instructors, involving the model's effects on i) learning, ii) teaching, and iii) relationships with and among students.

5.1.1 Effects on learning

The effects on learning category involves three subcategories: i) increase in student motivation and engagement with language learning, ii) empowering independent learning, and iii) making students more confident learners. When reflecting on the model's effects on the **increase in student motivation and engagement**, participants emphasized the *positive role of technology*. Specifically, P1 noted that "a switch from paper-based textbook to a digital tool, [which is] easy to navigate and very accessible, is beneficial and appealing to different types of learners. Students were more involved [with the course], because it was modern, and [involved] something they were used to [doing] on their gadgets." P3 also commented on the positive role of technology: "The fact that students can use technology [in the course] brings extra motivation."

In addition, the *organizational structure of the course*, which BLL enables, is another factor that contributes to student motivation and engagement. BLL allows for reconfiguring the distribution of learning activities, with activities that target interactional and speaking skills being given prominence in F2F sessions (Nedashkivska, 2015). Such an approach "helps students become active participants in the classroom," and prompts "students to keep up with consistent learning, [which] adds extra motivation" (P3). Additionally, "having everything – grammar reference, conjugation tables, glossary, etc., – in one place [i.e., on the resource website]" (P4), and "the continuity [of topics] is beneficial for both students and instructors" (P1).

Other success factors that prompt increase in student motivation and engagement are the *accessibility and flexibility* of the BLL resource. P3 pointed out that students "love the fact that they can access the resource from various devices." This view was furthered by P4: "The version for cell and smart phones allowed [students] to work on [online practice exercises and activities] from anywhere and anytime. It was particularly popular with students who commute. This is a huge advantage of the BLL resources, compared to traditional textbooks."

The **empowering independent learning** subcategory was highlighted by P4, who indicated that the BLL resource enables "motivated students to study even more." The instructor specified that some students often go to the "For Students" section to learn more in-depth about a grammar topic targeted in the instructional process, to practice verb conjugations, or to review material by engaging with practice exercises in online sessions.

The third subcategory is *making students more confident learners*. According to P3, the model motivates students to stay engaged in a BLL course, because online sessions “allow them to prepare better for [F2F] classes and feel encouraged to participate [in class activities],” thereby making students more confident learners overall.

5.1.2 Effects on teaching

The effects on teaching category is represented by the following subcategories: i) shift in the instructor’s role; ii) managing in-class and online student learning; iii) importance of training; iv) reduction of class-preparation time; and v) resource flexibility. The *shift in the instructor’s role* stems from the reconfiguration of tasks in F2F and online components, enabled by BLL. Specifically, the model allows such elements as new vocabulary and grammar to be presented in online sessions, thereby freeing F2F time for more learner-centered activities, with emphasis placed on speaking and interactional tasks (Nedashkivska, 2015). P3 notes: “My perception of teaching the language was that the teacher’s role is central. The work with the model helped me shift the focus on students’ using the language.”

Regarding *managing in-class and online student learning*, instructors pointed out that during the in-class sessions, they “are more in control of the [teaching] process,” while during the online sessions, there is not much control and instructors struggle to persuade their students “to complete the online lessons prior to F2F class” (P3). On another note, instructors emphasize that “the F2T component will always make it clear to the instructor whether a student is prepared or not, [which] is the main benefit of combining in-class and online sessions” (P1), and therefore they “need to trust [their] students [with an online component]” (P1). Also, instructors stressed the importance of paying particular attention to those students who may be falling behind: “If you detect that someone is ... falling behind, you need to have a conversation with the student to resolve the issue. If this is not caught on time, the student may not be able to catch up” (P3). In order to be more in control of students’ learning, all study participants emphasized the *importance of training* on how to teach a BLL course, particularly for those instructors who are teaching such a course for the first time. P2 notes: “I was very fortunate to receive training from [a co-author of the resource] before teaching. At that time, there was no information on how to teach via BLL, and some of my colleagues [who had no access to training] dropped the idea of using the resource.” The incorporation of training videos and instructions on how to use the resource “made teaching very intuitive” (P4). Importantly, once the specifics of the model are mastered, BLL resources “require *minimal preparation*” (P2), as “everything is already there [including the instructor resource bank]” (P4). Additionally, the resource materials were *very flexible and “easy to combine with [one’s] own resources”* (P1) and were also “easy to integrate into other learning platforms” (P4), providing additional motivation to instructors.

5.1.3 Effects on relationships with and among students

With respect to relationships with and among students, two subcategories emerge: i) lessening of instructor control, and ii) maximizing time for student interaction. With respect to the first

subcategory, instructors pointed out that students “really appreciate the feeling of less control over them” (P1), which the model offers by providing students with more accessibility and flexibility. In turn, by *lessening control*, “instructors become closer to students ..., more like a mediator rather than a supervisor, ... which is positive in terms of [instructors’] relationships [with students]” (P1).

With respect to relationships among students, in the instructors’ views, BLL contributes to *maximizing time for “student interaction* during F2F sessions, compared to a traditional class” (P2). This was corroborated by P3: “I feel that [the model] motivates students to engage more during F2F hours [because they are required to come prepared].” Additionally, BLL “expands opportunities for student interactions outside the class. Online sessions offer discussion forums, through which students interact and build connections” (P1). However, P4 disagreed with P1, saying that opportunities for interaction during online sessions are minimal, and that the lack of opportunity should be compensated by more actively engaging students in pair and group activities during in-class hours, which can help build connection between students.

5.2 BLL challenges

In addition to success factors, the study participants also identified some challenges associated with the integration of the BLL model into beginner Ukrainian language courses. They also offered suggestions on how to improve the BLL resource.

Among these challenges, instructors mentioned *expected technological glitches*, which are “unavoidable, and create frustration and annoyance” (P2). Therefore, P3 stresses the importance of *ensuring outside-of-class technical support* when glitches happen.

Instructors also expressed their *need for more flexibility of the BLL resource*. Specifically, P4 noted that “it would be nice to have more exercises [at instructor’s disposal] as well as opportunities for customizing the resource,” for example, a bank of additional activities that can be added to or deleted from the resource. P4 also underscored instructors’ need to provide their students with *more detailed feedback* on their performance on online exercises in addition to the brief automated feedback provided by the resource on completion of exercises. Finally, P4 suggested *developing reminders and notifications* to be sent to students regarding upcoming or missed online session exercises. In their view, “less motivated students [due to such reminders and notifications] tend to go to a web-based textbook or an app more [often] in order to do exercises than to open a traditional textbook. Students tend to study more with interactive exercises for homework. It adds some dynamics to learning.”

In summary, our results are reassuring and present generally favorable instructor perspectives of BLL, while acknowledging some challenges the instructors encountered. All these results, albeit limited to the studied case, have more general implications to consider when implementing and using BLL in a foreign language classroom.

6. Conclusion

Our investigation of digitally-assisted blended learning in a language classroom focused on the instructors' perspectives. The major objectives of this study were to learn about the instructors' views on the model, while also investigating how BLL may transform, enhance, challenge, or hinder learning and teaching experiences, practices, and relationships. Our empirical study, focusing on qualitative analysis, proceeded with collecting both survey and focus group data. Results from the survey (not reported in this study) were used to formulate questions for the focus group discussion, which constituted the primary data set for answering our research questions. Our results demonstrate that the BLL supports different learning styles, as has been noted earlier (Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2013), promoting confidence in learners (Scida & Saury, 2006). Interestingly, our results point to an increase in student motivation and empowering independent learning, in contradiction to earlier studies in the field (Bijeikienė et al., 2011), an angle that is promising to tap into in greater detail.

With respect to teaching practices, the data reported here confirm the importance and necessity of instructor training (Murday et al., 2008; Comas-Quinn, 2011), and the fact that once introduced, BLL requires less preparation time when compared to a traditional language classroom. The data also pointed out the transformational role of the instructor in BLL and changes that are required in managing F2F time as well as overseeing and constantly monitoring online student learning. With respect to relationships, our results diverge from some earlier studies in the field (Gleason, 2013; Shelley et al., 2013; Yang, 2014), but also support the results of earlier studies that stress the strengthening of the relationships between instructors and students (Yang, 2014; Murday et al., 2008), as well as among students. This issue deserves more attention in scholarship, and we look forward to future comparable results in this domain of inquiry.

In summary, we see our results as providing valuable input for the field of digitally-assisted learning and instruction, relevant to the broader community of those who implement or teach with BLL. Therefore, we would like to conclude with some insights we gained from the study. The following key points could assist in our further understanding of incorporation of digital tools into language learning and instruction, online learning in general, and BLL in particular.

Key insights and suggestions

BLEND-LEARNING AND THE STUDIED RESOURCE

- BLL presents an important blend of F2F and online activities, each set supporting and enhancing another
- Important positives with respect to the resources under discussion include clear organizational structure; intuitive nature; accessibility and flexibility of use; simple navigation; consistency; and complementary nature of F2F and online components
- Inclusion of training modules on teaching methods and techniques in BLL (either in the form of in-person workshops or online recordings) sets up for success.

Suggestions are to:

- Ensure understanding about what a blended-learning approach is and what is required and at stake on the part of instructors and students
- Ensure greater flexibility of resources by providing an option for instructors to customize portions of the resources, and a bank of additional activities for instructors to use
- Improve design in order to provide instant feedback to students in online self-study lessons
- Add an electronic reminder for students to complete online lessons prior to their F2F classes.

STUDENT LEARNING AND TEACHING PRACTICES

- Technology contributes to student motivation: appeal of modern and digital tools; familiar and easy to use technological tools
- Enabling the student-centered approach, BLL transforms students into active learners
- BLL empowers independent learning, instilling confidence in students
- Instructor motivation increases appeal of digital technologies, ease of access to resources with clear organization and user-friendly navigation, and ability to adapt resources to various educational contexts
- Important positives for instructors include a reduction of class preparation time, a ready-available resource bank for instructors, and compatibility of resources with other platforms and tools.

Suggestions are to:

- Ensure that course expectations are clear
- Be proactive in identifying students who might be falling behind; monitor students' progress; assist with reminders to stay on track of the BLL sequence of F2F and online lessons.

RELATIONSHIPS

- Student active learning and student-centered approach contribute to strengthening of relationships between instructors and students, and among students
- Instructors' lessening of control provides comfort to students; the relationships are closer and more positive
- BLL strengthens connections between students: online self-study preparation for F2F classes provides students with confidence and encourages them to engage during the in-class sessions; communication and interaction are at the forefront of activities during F2F classes; F2F classes are more intense and productive
- Discussion forums in online sessions provide students with opportunities to connect outside the F2F meetings.

Suggestion is to:

- Provide more online activities that contribute to student connection and interaction online and beyond F2F classes (in addition to existing online forum discussion platforms).

We would like to end with a note that a perfect and harmonious ‘blend’ does not depend only on developers of resources, but also on those implementing the ‘blend’. Therefore, we are grateful to all the instructors who embraced the ‘blend’ discussed here, and we encourage all of those experimenting or considering BLL to keep abreast of research, with new findings informing our teaching practices and learning successes.

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