

DEVELOPING HYBRID ESP COURSES AT UNWE

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Abstract

Hybrid courses which combine the benefits of face-to-face and electronic modes of instruction have gained popularity in higher education as they can increase the motivation of the new generations of learners and hence the effectiveness of academic courses. The objective of the research presented is to provide a blueprint for developing hybrid ESP courses in the fields of economics and socio-political studies in order to deliver modern and effective instruction in specialised English at the University of National and World Economy, taking into account the realities of the world today. The study seeks to yield a reliable picture of the students' attitudes and needs, and a model for course optimisation.

Keywords: English for specific purposes, ESP, hybrid learning, blended learning, hybrid ESP courses

JEL: I23, Z13

Introduction

For several decades, with the advent of the Internet and the information and communication technologies (ICT), major changes have been occurring in all spheres of human life. New models of instruction are increasingly entering education enabling academic staff and students to carry out fully fledged teaching and learning processes, as well as provide an alternative for obtaining an educational degree for students who for some reason cannot attend face-to-face classes, consultations and exams. Educational technologies can add significant value to foreign language teaching and learning not only through their time- and labour-saving functions, but also through their potential to provide learners with opportunities to go beyond the traditional concept of learning, to inspire creative activities and lead to learners taking greater responsibility for their learning (Stanley, 2013, p. 1-2).

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The global COVID-19 pandemic, which lasted for several years, led to educational institutions reconsidering the use of educational approaches other than the traditional face-to-face one, as well as trying out options that would not otherwise have gained their attention for various reasons – the lack of financial resources, policy at national or institutional level, a low degree of digitalisation, national stereotypes, cultural specificities and preferences, etc. With an increasingly diverse student base and the need to equip students with knowledge and skills for their successful future professional careers, tertiary education institutions seek to offer high-quality education “by adopting e-learning solutions that provide choice in terms of the time and place of learning” (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010, p. 372).

Global trends and Bulgarian context

In Bulgaria, most universities use ICT in some form – learning management systems which facilitate the exchange of course content between a teacher and students or between teachers, as well as the assignment of tasks in various forms and checking them, and last but not least – the assessment of learners’ knowledge. However, the extent to which online learning opportunities are used is still insufficient, and it is difficult to speak of a hybrid model, since its implementation was only necessary when the lockdown restrictions were introduced. In addition, it is noteworthy that the use of educational platforms until the pandemic hit was predominantly asynchronous. There was scant experience and good practices with the synchronous mode, which gave rise to a number of difficulties and teachers and educational managers had to face hitherto unknown challenges.

At the same time, the deployment of emergency remote teaching, and later a hybrid one, highlighted to faculty and other participants in the educational process the advantages and disadvantages of these teaching models and paved the way for the awareness of the fact that combining the benefits of face-to-face and electronic modes of instruction can increase the motivation of the new generations of learners and hence the effectiveness of academic courses. In order to achieve an adequate learning process, however, tasks and materials designed for hybrid teaching and learning and tailored to the needs of UNWE students studying English for specific purposes (ESP) must be developed. Assignments should be interactive and based on various electronic resources, and the materials should be of two types – constructing knowledge and skills, and testing/assessing the student performance and learning outcomes.

Hybrid learning, as a combination of two delivery modes – traditional (face-to-face, F2F) and electronic learning, provides richer opportunities than each of these modes separately, and through technology expands the range of methods and techniques used by the teacher (Alberts et al., 2010, p. 187). Some researchers

refer to it as the “new traditional model” or the “new normal” in course delivery (Dziuban et al., 2018, p. 1). The ratio of face-to-face and e-learning can vary widely at the discretion of institutions and faculty, but “the challenge of drawing on the best from both worlds is universal” (Carrasco & Johnson, 2015, p. 1). According to Snart (2010), hybrid learning would ideally mean “a fusion without loss” (Snart, 2010, p. 57). Hybrid courses are designed to “significantly alter the three pillars of traditional instruction – fixed time, fixed location, and fixed learning pace – with a more flexible and customized learning process” (Hall, 2010, p. 350). Studies show that hybrid courses provide authentic and multimodal opportunities, options for tailored instruction and feedback, and highly productive interactions with learners that are not feasible in traditional settings (Meskill et al., 2020, p. 160).

Hybrid learning should be viewed as a redesign of the instructional model with a shift to student-centered teaching, increased opportunities for interaction and integrated formative and summative assessment mechanisms (Watson, 2008, p. 5). According to Alberts et al. (2010), the following set of eight considerations (pedagogical principles) need to be taken into account and guide the design of hybrid learning:

- learning should be based on expected outcomes in terms of course content and a range of cognitive skills;
- learning programmes should require student active involvement;
- students should be encouraged to communicate and collaborate with the teacher and peers;
- teaching should create a learner-centred environment;
- it should accommodate different learning styles;
- it should provide timely and constructive feedback on learning;
- it should support learners to become autonomous;
- and should encourage and provide opportunities for student reflection on learning (Alberts et al., 2010, pp. 189-195).

As stated by Singh et al. (2021), the significance of studies on hybrid learning providing a roadmap to adopting it stems from the fact that there is still a paucity of research on its implementation at academic institutions. Such projects could contribute to the academic knowledge base and provide practical solutions for the successful inclusion of hybrid courses which “could lead to improvement in students’ time management skills, critical thinking skills, and comprehension skills” (Singh et al., 2021 p. 144).

In order to deliver optimal results from the ESP courses, the students’ views on the issue need to be examined – difficulties, priorities, needs and expectations, as well as an overview of the existing research and practice on the subject should be provided, so that criteria for the selection of materials and activities can be

developed, banks of authentic materials and resources can be compiled and the curricula can be updated in accordance with the hybrid model of learning.

The topicality of the problem is also determined by the fact that, despite the increased scientific and practical interest in hybrid learning, there is a lack of sufficient studies and research to comprehensively and multi-facetedly cover ESP courses. Surveys of the attitudes of students and faculty toward hybrid learning which can underpin the development of recommendations and criteria for the design of effective academic ESP courses have not been identified.

The study on the development of hybrid ESP courses at UNWE

Research methodology

The study on the development of hybrid ESP courses at UNWE is being conducted within a university project and is aimed at the enhancement of scientific and academic activities. The research object is academic courses in English for specific purposes (ESP) in the field of economics and socio-political studies. The research subject of the study is the hybrid model of instruction in ESP for students of economics and socio-political studies. The research objective is the development of hybrid courses in ESP in the field of economics and socio-political studies in order to provide modern and effective instruction in specialised English at UNWE, taking into account the realities of the world today – everyday life, communication, work and education, competitive environment.

Research tasks are as follows:

- Providing a review of the literature on the issue of hybrid learning and in particular academic hybrid ESP learning.
- Examining students' and teachers' perceptions of hybrid academic courses in ESP in the field of economics and socio-political studies.
- Identifying reference criteria in accordance with which recommendations can be made for adjusting and streamlining the academic courses in ESP in the field of economics and socio-political studies with a view to implementing a flexible hybrid educational model.
- Setting up resource banks for hybrid learning containing authentic learning and exam materials, as well as a database of other resources such as educational platforms and websites, software tools, interactive applications for group and individual foreign language learning.

The project objectives and tasks determine its content, which is why it consists of four stages. In the first stage, a literature review of the research on the development and implementation of hybrid learning in ESP will be provided. The second stage will be dedicated to developing and conducting a survey aiming to examine the perceptions of students and teachers involved in ESP education in the field of economics and socio-political studies at UNWE with regard to

hybrid academic ESP courses. In the third stage, the results of the survey will be analysed and criteria will be developed for adjusting and streamlining the ESP academic courses. In the fourth stage, resource banks for hybrid learning will be developed.

Generally, in the Bulgarian scientific literature there are no publications based on empirical research, dedicated to the models of academic ESP courses and more specifically those in the field of economics and socio-political studies, which would outline the specificities and trends in goal setting, and accordingly in defining the specific parameters of the ESP course. The lack of such research makes it difficult for the teaching staff to develop and update the academic ESP courses in Bulgaria.

The present study attempts to fill this void by presenting a reliable picture of the attitudes and needs of modern students of economics and socio-political studies, studying a specialised foreign language, and the model by which the courses offered can be optimised.

Working hypotheses are:

H1: Students prefer hybrid learning as it is more motivating and suitable for their learning style.

H2: Students prefer hybrid learning as it best suits their lifestyle and communication.

H3: Students prefer hybrid learning as it is more effective in terms of acquiring ESP knowledge and skills.

H4: Students develop functional ESP communicative competence more effectively due to hybrid learning.

H5: Teachers consider the hybrid model of ESP instruction to be more effective in terms of developing and improving students' functional ESP communicative competence.

H6: Students perceive the use of specialised banks with multimedia resources and materials for hybrid learning as part of modern and effective foreign language learning.

H7: Teachers consider the creation and exchange of banks of materials and resources for hybrid ESP instruction as a practice that leads to increased motivation and effectiveness of ESP courses.

Research methods and tools include the methods of data collection; the primary units, observed units and sample size; and data analysis. As the main quantitative method of data collection, a personal online structured survey, will be used to capture students' perceptions and attitudes towards the research problem. The primary units of the present study are all students studying English at UNWE. The observed units are identical with the primary units. The sample will include survey respondents and will be based on the information provided by

UNWE students. Each student opinion will only be recorded once in the survey. To triangulate data, a similar survey will be used to study the perceptions and attitudes of UNWE faculty. The data analysis will be performed using SPSS and graphically presented using Excel. Mainly a descriptive analysis will be applied, but also an inferential analysis based on hypotheses testing of relationships and dependencies, correlation and cluster analyses, etc. A critical analysis of existing theoretical concepts will also be used – a historical review and theoretical analysis of literary sources on the topic, as well as the method of conceptual analysis, which also includes particular procedures, such as a contextual analysis, comparative analysis, etc. In the application of the research methods, a complex approach is taken and their interrelationship is relied upon.

The research team's expectations are that a comprehensive study will be carried out with a focus on ESP hybrid learning, including the investigation of students' and teachers' attitudes concerning hybrid learning and the means of responding to their needs. Another expected result is the elaboration of detailed criteria and recommendations for the development of hybrid courses in English for specific purposes – adjusting and updating of learning content, types of tasks and activities for hybrid learning and teaching processes, as well as preparation of banks of materials and resources in accordance with the specificities of those courses. Last but not least, the team hopes that the main outcomes of the research will be incorporated in the teaching of English for specific purposes for all majors at UNWE.

The current stage of the project

So far, the research team has developed questionnaires for students and faculty. The questionnaires are identical in their main part which focuses on the perceptions of academic hybrid learning in ESP. This part comprises 19 questions while the second one – only two questions aimed at receiving personal data about the respondents: for the students – specialty and year of study, for the faculty – discipline taught (English, subject or both) and years of work experience. With the exception of one open-ended question, the types of the questions in the first part are either based on a five-point Likert scale or multiple-choice ones and are aimed at getting insights into respondents' attitudes, views and perceptions of hybrid ESP learning. Some of the questions involve a comparison of the three common modes of teaching and learning: face-to-face, online and hybrid. Other questions are intended to provide more information about the perceived weaknesses of the hybrid mode in ESP. Data gathering is scheduled for April and May 2023 and the sample includes UNWE faculty and students. The analysis of the collected data will be presented when statistical processing has finished.

Conclusion

Modern education must and should take into account the characteristic social and economic features of the time along with the changes in people's mindset. Translated into policy-making this means designing programmes and courses that inspire learning and enhance literacy in all its aspects thus resulting into a knowledge-based welfare society. Therefore, a university with a mission to provide graduates who are able to build a prosperous economy should offer high-quality education meeting adequately the needs of society individually and as a community. Taking into account the opportunities hybrid learning provides for improved knowledge acquisition and learner achievements, the research team sees the development of academic hybrid ESP courses as one of the ways to complete UNWE's mission and provide innovative training along with strenuous research of the issue and the dissemination of the Bulgarian expertise in the field. The in-depth study of the teachers' and students' views is expected to contribute to a comprehensive analysis of the educational situation and lead to the development of effective ESP courses and creation of materials banks offering a variety of sources, activities and options for ESP acquisition in a learner- and teacher-friendly environment.

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