

Mapping Blended English Learning in Higher Education: Transversal Skills in Focus

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Abstract

Transversal skills represent an important addition in shaping students' academic career. They enable them to get involved in authentic academic research and increase their cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal abilities. In faculties of sciences, students are more concerned with hard skills at the expense of foreign languages. However, this image is undergoing a big change. With the implementation of Pacte Esri 2030, students in Moroccan universities are required to acquire transversal skills in order to improve their linguistic and academic competence and performance. Accordingly, this paper examined the use of blended learning in teaching English for Specific Purposes in the faculty of Sciences, Mohammed I University by mapping the challenges that master's students encountered in their learning process, and the learning/teaching strategies used to achieve optimal results. This paper made use of a qualitative analysis based on questions addressed to master's students from different sections. Results showed that master's students emphasized both technical and human aspects when learning English for Specific Purposes within a blended learning framework.

Keywords: Blended learning, challenges, English, soft skill, prospects.

Introduction

In an ever-evolving world where teaching approaches and methods are always on the move, students in tertiary education are not only concerned with cognitive and practical themes which they learn inside their faculties and high institutes, but they also aspire for a bright future by finding a niche in the Moroccan workforce. Consequently, endowing students with hard skills is no longer enough in an environment where competition is becoming fiercer than ever before. By way of illustration, students in faculties of sciences are supposed to grasp and excel at scientific modules; still, they need also to be good at other spheres of knowledge such as foreign languages. While mastering foreign languages may not seem, at the first glance, at the same degree of importance, many scholars regard them as a soft skill which should be imperatively included in higher education curricula.

Soft skills are not limited only to communication per se; they encompass, according to Tang and Tan, “a diverse set of interpersonal, communication, emotional, and problem-solving abilities that go beyond academic qualifications, enriching students’ personal and professional lives” (Qtd. In El Mounatissir, 2023, p. 51). Accordingly, soft skills, which can be also referred to as transversal skills, represent an important addition in shaping students’ academic career. Not only do they enable them to get involved in authentic academic research, but they are also a major step towards academic and professional success.

While students are required to endeavor in their academic studies, by attending courses and carrying out practical and supervised exercises, professors are also meant to incorporate cutting-edge methods which not only make the teaching/learning process a comfortable environment, but also help students reach optimal results. In this regard, learning foreign languages has recently undergone a drastic change; in addition to face-to-face learning which has always been the norm for decades long, various modules are nowadays taught online. The latter has proven itself a practical method of teaching under the Covid 19 crisis. According to C. Kalapriya,

[A]s Covid 19 forced the requirement of social distancing, this outcome hit every sector significantly, which includes education. Students and teachers faced different challenges in these difficult times of Covid, giving rise to methods that can help avoid social interaction and at the same time, ensure the continuation of education. (2021, pp. 158-159)

However, and now that Covid 19 and its impacts are gone forever, technology seems to have found a niche in higher education along with face-to-face learning. This merging of technology within the often-used traditional methods of learning has led to an innovative way of teaching called blended learning. In other words, it is an “umbrella term for a number of different models of learning that combine —or “blend”—either traditional or technology-enriched classrooms with online instructions” (Beaver et al, 2014, p. 2). Additionally, and according to Singh, “the concept of blended learning is rooted in the idea that learning is not just a one-time event—learning is a continuous process” (Qtd. In Sekhar Rao, 2019, p. 1) and “has enjoyed wide acceptance as a teaching and learning approach in higher education” (McCarthy & Palmer, 2023, p. 1).

While any learning process should take into account students’ needs and interests, it should also cater for their different learning styles and strategies. According to Strobl, “learning is an inherently social process, where different strategies for effective learning can be implemented” (Qtd. In El-Mowafy et al, 2013, p. 132). Therefore, instructors are supposed to take into account their students’ differences and thus incorporate the most adequate methods towards a viable learning environment. Accordingly, this paper targets the use of blended learning in teaching English to master’s students in the faculty of Sciences, Oujda. From my short experience as a professor of English in this faculty, I have discovered that students experience various technical issues either while being exposed to digital learning content or during exams on Rosetta Stone platform. In this regard, we will try to find out whether the challenges that master’s students encounter in their learning process are limited to the technical sphere or may go beyond it. Additionally, we will sift through the learning/teaching strategies applied to reach optimal results. This paper will make use of a qualitative analysis based on questions addressed to master’s students from different sections in the faculty of Sciences, Mohammed I University.

1. General Expectations

According to a presentation that was delivered by the former Moroccan minister of higher education, scientific research and innovation on January 9th, 2023, in what was called PACTE-ESRI 2030, expectations from postgraduate students are twofold: Not only are they supposed to be equipped with necessary innovation and critical thinking to boost their competitiveness, they are also meant to acquire a certificate in foreign languages and digital skills, a prerequisite to obtain their Master’s degree (Dqaqi, 2025). Unlike their peers in the English Departments in faculties of humanities where English is taught as a hard skill, and

where professors focus on the literary and linguistic facets of the target language, students in faculties of sciences expect linguistic content that takes into account their scientific background. They require a certain level of proficiency in English for various purposes, including consulting scientific references, most of which are published in English. In this vein, it is worthy to mention that postgraduate students undergo a hybrid method of learning English whereby they attend in-person classes, and have online classes on Rosetta Stone platform¹. It is true that logging in to the platform represents one of the ways through which blended learning can be implemented; still, instructors can resort to other methods to make such a way of learning achievable. In this regard, they can choose between a variety of models such as the rotation model, flex model, self-blending model, enriched virtual model or flipped classroom model².

2. Blended Learning : Merits

Blended learning can have multiple educational and academic merits; the mere use of two different methods of learning can make students have virtual classes in an anxiety-free atmosphere which is different from the environment where face-to-face learning takes place. Another reason for switching to blended learning is that “using technology in higher education is becoming a standard for 21st century’s learners” (Yilmaz, 2017, p. 93). It is evident that experienced instructors have the academic and pedagogical assets to make their classrooms and lecture halls an appropriate place for face-to-face learning; however, shifting to a non-identical method may help students embark on a different educational and learning experience with the aim of achieving better educational outcomes.

Fostering self-paced learning is one of the first merits of blended learning. Unlike in-person learning, online activities help students work, analyze, carry out assignments, and conduct their tasks at their own pace. Therefore, students in brick-and-mortar classes often work under the constraint of time as instructors always set time limits for their written activities. Furthermore, oral activities may represent an additional burden on students as they are supposed to answer their professors’ questions on the spot. In such learning conditions, the pressure that some students may feel can be multiplied. In oral activities, students have to understand their professors’ instructions and answer them in a way that shows understanding and grasp of

¹ Students in the faculty of sciences, Oujda no longer use the Rosetta Stone platform; the questionnaire that they answered was carried out when the platform was still in use.

² For more on different models of blending learning, check Rao, Sekhar Chandra. “Blended Learning: A New Hybrid Learning Strategy” *Journal for Research Scholars and Professional of English Language Teaching*, vol. 3, issue 13, 2019, pp.1- 6.

different components of the target language. Therefore, the remedy to such an issue can be twofold: Instructors are required to incorporate more communicative and interpersonal tasks to boost students' trust and public speaking. Moreover, online activities can be an additional resort which can make students work in a more secure environment.

Additionally, blended learning can increase learners' autonomy and make them responsible for their own learning. A person becomes autonomous when they acquire a certain degree of self-dependence. Similarly, students can reach the status of academic autonomy when they are weaned from that complete educational support which they obtain from their instructors. Autonomous learning can take place in different environments such as the face-to-face-learning model. By applying innovative teaching methods such as the learner-centered approach, instructors are no longer the only source of knowledge; they are rather seen as facilitators, mentors, scaffolders, or mediators. Accordingly, students may engage in different tasks where they can foster their self-dependence and critical thinking. This autonomy can be increased when students are faced to virtual environments. According to Pratiwi and Maluyo, digitalization promotes autonomous learning and has a positive impact on learning in general (Qtd. In Mansour, 2025, p. 2). Put differently, students are left to fend for themselves as they have enough time to explain difficult words, customize learning for their own needs, and abide by the instructions that professors streamline on academic platforms. This means that students' role is transformed from being mere recipients of knowledge into an active part of the learning/teaching process. They are also assuming more responsibility for their learning and assessing their own progress (Mansour, 2025, p. 2).

Moreover, blended learning can help create virtual learning environments. While the first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed an unprecedented scientific revolution, more and more households are connected to the Internet, mobile phones have become more available, and artificial intelligence has made humans' academic and professional tasks easier and faster. Therefore, students who grew up in such an environment playing video games in their teen age, are nowadays savvy in using electronic devices for academic and scientific purposes. This digital literacy improves students' learning process in a virtual environment, far away from the monotony that may sometimes shape face-to-face learning environments.

Furthermore, virtual learning environments are rather informal compared to the face-to-face learning model. Under the latter, students are supposed to abide by some particular rules such as punctuality, regular attendance, and formality. Therefore, students can choose the venue which make them feel at ease, and positively impacts their learning/acquisition. Additionally,

blended learning can be more time and effort-saving: Students do not need to take any means of transport to go to campus; rather, digitalization has helped them to revert the venue of learning just like the flipped classroom model reverted learning methods.

3. Blended Learning: Challenges and Prospects

While blended learning's merits cannot be overlooked, instructors and students may encounter a variety of challenges to secure its practicality. These challenges can be human, technical, and sometimes logistic. In this regard, I asked students from different departments about the challenges which they have come across during their learning experience on Rosetta Stone platform. Their answers oscillated between technical and human issues.

3.1. Master's Students' Perceptions of Blended Learning (Excellence Track)

25 students belonging to the departments of Geology and Chemistry expressed their concern about using Rosetta Stone platform in higher education. 16 students are females and 9 of them are males. The aforementioned students were asked to write about the experience that they acquired from online learning. The answers provided by the students were collected and analyzed from a qualitative perspective. In this regard, we noted that the first aspect which the participants agreed on was the unavailability of electronic devices. For different financial reasons, not all students can possess personal laptops or desktops. It is true that mobile phones can be used as virtual learning environments; still, their size cannot yield the same optimal results. Additionally, participants averred that they found Internet charges very costly. Therefore, they may resort to sharing Internet connection with room-mates or use some low-cost means of connection. However, these means are not always reliable, and do not always result in desirable outcomes. Moreover, other participants raised the issue of motivation. According to Penny Ur, "learning motivation makes teaching and learning immeasurably easier and more pleasant as well as more productive"(1996, p. 274). Therefore, students' responses in this regard may be construed as a form of trust in their professors to secure a more anxiety-free learning environment in which learners can reach a high level of motivation.

3.2 Master's Students' Perceptions of Blended Learning (Fundamental Track)

The same question with regard to the use of Rosetta Stone platform was addressed to 52 Master's students from different departments of the faculty of sciences, Oujda. 25 students are females and 27 are males. In this aspect, we resorted to the same method which we used with students in the Excellence track. In addition to the technical issues raised by their counterparts in the Excellence track, the participants surprisingly underscored the learners/instructors' relationship, and how this close contact can lead to better educational outcomes. In this regard,

participants tend to concur that face-to-face learning is more engaging and more enjoyable than online learning. While students assume that it is not always easy to stay focused during online courses due to different distractions which students can be exposed to while being away from their classes, they assume that technology can by no means be a reliable substitute for instructors. This means that digital learning cannot replace professors who are, according to students, a source of warmth, academic support, trust, and immediate response to their different queries.

Additionally, students underscored missing their friends on campus during online learning. It is true that universities and high institutes are a great source of knowledge and learning, and that is the primary reason for which students are enrolled there; however, a great number of students create networks with other learners in their faculties or even beyond, or take part in extra-curricular activities such as sports or art clubs. Others may use other facilities on campus like the library where students carry out projects and look for valuable references, or spend time in the cafeteria where they can have informal educational chats around cups of coffee. In this respect, some participants stated clearly that they miss their friends during virtual classes. While students' comments in this regard highlight the social side in tertiary education, they also demonstrate that online learning makes students temporally severed from an otherwise friendly environment where they can feel close to their peers³.

4. Professors' Role

Professors' role is of paramount importance in any academic relationship. They devise lesson plans, supervise students in their learning process, and assist them in their academic path. In this vein, the instructors' role in a blended learning environment seems to be twofold as they have to cater for their students' academic needs both online and in-person. However, some professors are reluctant to include online activities in their courses. They are busy during the whole academic year either giving lectures, correcting students' assignments, supervising graduate and postgraduate students, invigilating in exams, writing articles, and taking part in scientific events; so, incorporating a new method of teaching may represent an additional load for the teaching staff. Additionally, digital learning requires digital literacy. On this point, some instructors still resort to traditional methods to transmit knowledge to their learners. The apprehension of using innovative ways of teaching seems to haunt a great category of teachers

³ Evaluation is also one of the challenges that both students and professors encounter in blended learning. By way of illustration, some students do not manage to log in to their accounts during exams held on the platform. Similarly, professors are sometimes supposed to act as instructors, invigilators or even as technicians.

who may assume that switching to new ways of teaching may compromise their instructions or may not yield satisfactory results. Therefore, professors need to have regular training in digital teaching methods, and should be convinced of the importance of incorporating digitalization in tertiary education.

Conclusion

This study was founded on two educational premises: First, we assumed that master's students in the faculty of sciences, Mohammed I University, give less weight to transversal skills since they are more concerned with scientific modules. Second, we surmised that technical issues could be the major obstacle in their blended learning environment. However, the results challenged the initial hypothesis; students' answers underlined both the technical and human aspects related to such a learning model. Additionally, students seem to be fully aware of the relevance of English as a transversal skill for both their academic studies and professional future careers.

Transversal skills are very important educational assets that all students in tertiary education, regardless of their majors, should be equipped with. These skills can be either cognitive, intrapersonal, or interpersonal. Therefore, learning languages can be one of the most valuable means to endow learners with interpersonal and linguistic prospects. It is true that in-person teaching can be a viable means to teach foreign languages; still, an adequate use of blended learning may lead to better educational achievements. In a world where digitalization is gaining more and more ground, incorporating digital learning in our curricula has become a prerequisite. Therefore, all stakeholders should be aware of the significance of blended learning in tertiary education.

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