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**IMPLEMENTATION OF BLENDED LEARNING
IN TEACHING ENGLISH AT ARMENIAN STATE UNIVERSITY
OF ECONOMICS: FROM EXPERIMENT TO RESULTS**

The paper demonstrates the findings of the experimental study into the efficiency of blended learning when teaching English for Special Purposes to students applying miscellaneous online tools and platforms in the teaching process, as well as analyzes how best to apply these methods and techniques to achieve success and engage students in the lessons with more beneficial and interest-provoking activities.

The study was conducted among first-year students studying in their bachelor's degree program, during the first semester by previously testing their initial knowledge of English via a diagnostic test and later, after some lessons held, a set of formative assessments (tests) were carried out to discover how effective blended learning was and if they improved their knowledge after the installation of this learning modality.

The results showed that the knowledge improved and increased substantially in the experimental group where blended learning methods were applied, while the control group based on traditional teaching methods had comparatively little progress.

Key words: *blended learning, online tools, online platforms, efficiency, language skills, evaluation, mode of teaching*

Blended learning has been around since the 20th century, but gained popularity and significance all over the world after COVID-19 pandemic hit all countries including Armenia. Some educators prefer a traditional, face-to-face mode of instruction, some prefer completely online teaching modality, while others consider blended learning as the most beneficial and preferable mode of instruction especially in teaching foreign languages. Although these new media, online collaboration tools, learning management systems, and online platforms can create undesirable issues for many educators to embrace the current situation, yet dozens of lecturers were happy to shift to blended learning modality, immerse in the online and virtual reality to offer better-organized courses with multiple tools to their learners.

However, this seemed to be the greatest issue for many lecturers and teachers, who had some basic computer knowledge of online platforms and resources which

were not sufficient to conduct the teaching process, and the necessity to transform teaching materials from paper form into online resources and digitization of lectures was an initial shock for these professionals. They also had to familiarize themselves with video conferences or had to know Learning Management Systems, websites that could assist in the teaching process. They had to make their lectures more efficient, motivate themselves and their students in this new ‘normal’ reality, which was still foggy. Lecturers also desperately needed the motivation to organize their lessons as efficiently as they had been during traditional classroom teaching.

Traditional classroom practice used to dominate teaching at different educational institutions and would have stayed as such if COVID-19 had not changed the rules of the game. The pandemic posed new challenges and made educational institutions work under strict conditions and adopt contingent decisions that would benefit beneficiaries and would not deprive employees of their work routine. The solution came in the form of a completely online mode of teaching, which became a nightmare for many educators and educational institutions. Many educators had to struggle with low computer literacy and had to adapt to online teaching platforms to deliver their lessons. These new teaching techniques (remote teaching model) and media of online collaboration have led us to new issues and challenges to be embraced by educators and lecturers throughout the web and in the entire world. The issues include but are not limited to methodology choice, instructional continuity, behavioral issues, choice of educational materials etc. This shift to online teaching, the necessity to translate the teaching expertise into a new teaching modality, the forced immersion and resistance of some educators to use technological advances has their own effect on the ways the online learning in HEIs will develop /Torgomyan, 2020: 180/.

The online learning environments afford the opportunity to shift the role of instructors from “delivering” to “listening and supporting” /Doubler, Grisham, Paget, 2003/.

Instructors nowadays have to adapt their teaching materials for online education as they have faced the problems of digitization of textbooks, printed handouts, or tests. Siemens encourages teachers to consider what elements are required in any learning environment and what corollary tools exist online:

- Have a place for learner expression (blog/portfolio/emails).
- Have a place for content interaction (which LMSs/Learning Management Systems have) /Siemens, 2004/.

Later on, after 2020, the year that posed huge challenges and created uncertainties in the sphere of education, let alone the other sectors of any country’s functioning, university leadership, the academic staff, and students had to rise to this challenge by attending classes two weeks online and two weeks offline and apply all their knowledge and skills to overcome the new difficulties and not to be

hurt by this whirl about. In Armenia, some institutions (including ASUE) shifted to the blended form of learning after the pandemic hit the world.

Blended learning as a notion started its existence long before COVID-19 pandemic shook the foundations of everything around the world, but it revived its functioning and operations after the spread of the pandemic in different countries. Many scholars and scientists have contributed to giving the precise definition of blended learning but nothing has turned out to be a universal definition so far that will finally indicate its true essence due to the new teaching modality.

Here is one of the definitions born in the University of Calgary: “The integration of face-to-face and online learning to help enhance the classroom experience and extend learning through the innovative use of information and communications technology. Blended strategies enhance student engagement and learning through online activities to the course curriculum, and improve effectiveness and efficiencies by reducing lecture time” /University of Calgary, 2008: 6/. This definition demonstrates what is considered to be blended learning while extensively using communication technology, but which resources should be used to facilitate the work of the lecturers are not fully clarified, hence we further explored other definitions, and the next one that caught our attention was the following. The Sloan Consortium defines blended courses as “A course that blends online and face-to-face delivery: substantial proportion (30 to 79%) of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has some face-to-face meetings, with the remaining portion of the course content delivered by face-to-face instruction or other non-web-based methods, such as paper textbooks” /Allen, Seaman, Garrett, 2007/.

These two definitions do not frame the notion of blended learning from the point of view of pedagogy, teaching modality and best practices, they are just statements about the facts of blended learning. We had to identify what we wanted to achieve during blended learning practices and highlight its real value for educators and the efficiency it can have for the language acquisition of the learners. We still went on researching other scientists’ ideas and found out what Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal in a research brief for EDUCAUSE entitled “Blended Learning” had noted: “Blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment, rather than a ratio of delivery modalities. In other words, blended learning should be approached not merely as a temporal construct, but rather as a fundamental redesign of the instructional model” /Dziuban, Hartman, Moskal, 2004: 3/.

We could even go further by mentioning that blended learning could break the constraints of learning space and time allowing learners to study at their workplace,

in the transport, on the way to and from somewhere and devote as much time as they find sufficient for this or that discipline or according to time available for studies. Thereby, self-paced learning could make the learning process more efficient than before.

We tried to gain some insights into the coinage of the term “blended learning”. The origin of the term “blended learning” is generally traced back to a 1999 press release by EPIC learning in Atlanta, Friesen pointed out that from the outset the term had been plagued by ambiguity and then concluded: “Blended learning, in other words, is almost any combination of technologies, pedagogies and even job tasks. It includes some of the oldest mechanical media (e.g. film) and theories of learning (e.g. behaviorism), as well as the newest” /Friesen, 2019/.

As we can see, scientists are still trying to find the best definition for this relatively new teaching and learning modality and we hope to contribute to its creation and popularization in the future.

Although there are many other definitions, we mainly concentrate on the above-mentioned ones as they describe this process more or less completely and thoroughly although there are many gaps to fill in later on.

To address the main objectives and goals of our current research, we applied the following techniques and analytical tools:

- Statistical analysis
- Online and offline research and experiment
- Mix of comparative and experimental analyses.

It was of utmost importance to analyze blended learning from its outset, to find the best combination of online and offline teaching modalities. The analysis revolved around the consecutive usage of online and offline modes of teaching, and how to apply them interchangeably while achieving better performance of learners in their everyday learning routine.

Being teachers and instructors, we always try to study the best practices existing in the world and adapt our teaching resources and methods for the benefit of our learners, as their success and progress are the result of mutual work, that of teachers and students.

While conducting the research, we came across some online platforms which offer not only great functionality and toolkit but also have internal statistical analysis tools that facilitate data collection on students’ performance in online settings or while doing homework or tasks online. They also enhance the functionality design of teaching tasks. It is invaluable in terms of assessment and learning outcomes.

We conducted a comparative analysis of online platforms and resources to find the best ones for our blended teaching experiment and offered them to the

experimental group of students and according to the obtained results, highlighted the best ones to be constantly used.

Finally, the experimental analysis helped us see the progress of the students during their studies. A diagnostic test was previously given to them, then during the term, they took three more tests and the results of the tests were demonstrated on the diagram thus showing which groups had made considerable progress during the term and which ones had no progress or little of it.

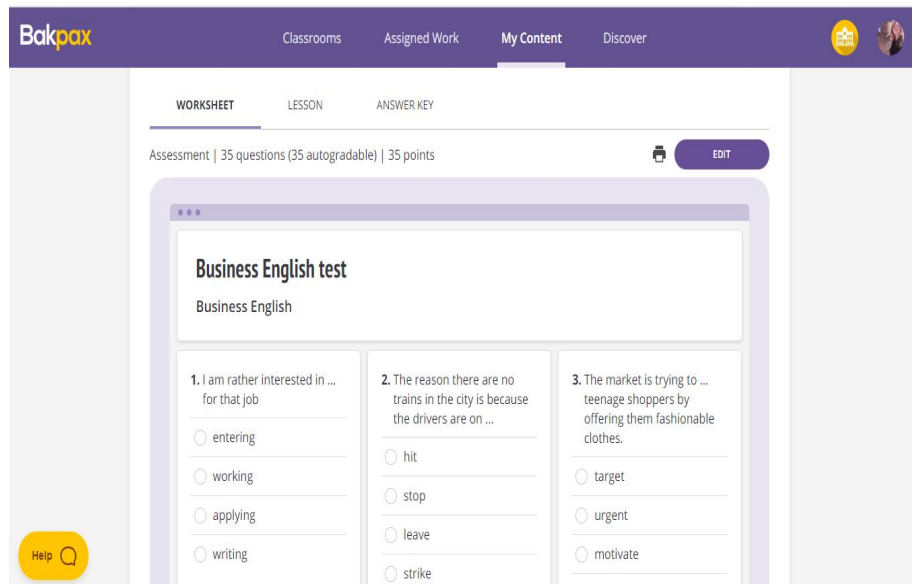
The focus of our research is on teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Armenian State University of Economics (ASUE). At the beginning of the lockdown, we had only an online mode of teaching and the whole process was organized by us rather efficiently and the results were very good because of the usage of various online tools and platforms. Later our university leadership transferred to the blended mode of learning which was not completely the one we have defined as blended learning because during this process our lecturers used online technologies and participated in online lessons, although, based on blended learning principles, they should have recorded their lectures and shared via online platforms. If we pay attention to the definition popularized by Clayton Christensen Institute that emphasizes an “element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace in the online portion of the blend as well as the importance of integrated instruction between the online and face-to-face modalities /Horn, Staker, 2014/, we applied another strategy where lecturers were always present during online and offline settings. We can argue about its efficiency or inefficiency, but this was the effect of the initial shock of the new reality and new ideology.

Afterwards, we decided to achieve better outcomes by applying both online and offline settings implementing the methods of blended learning.

We can state that this method opened a new teaching horizon and shifted the teaching paradigm from traditional to ultra-modern, online, blended, or any other mix of teaching.

We conducted an experiment to evaluate how best to use the blended mode (online resources and offline setting) to achieve the best results in teaching English for Special Purposes, but this strategy can be used in teaching any discipline or subject, although our main focus is English.

Let us introduce the groups of students who participated in the experiment. The first group majoring in ‘Actuarial and Financial Mathematics’ started their education in blended learning modality and the other group majoring in “Information Technology” studied English in the traditional classroom. The test which aimed at checking the knowledge of business vocabulary was identical in both groups and the results were nearly the same: there were up to a median of 43% correct answers.



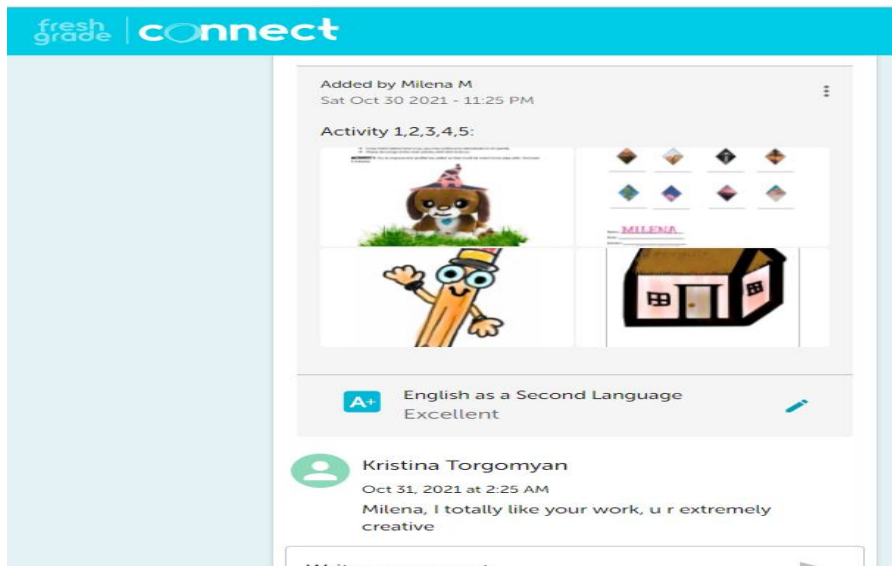
Picture 1 demonstrates a sample of the diagnostic test given to the experimental group, where the multiple choice format was used to check the business vocabulary of the students on www.bakpax.com, whereas the control group was provided with the same test but in the paper-based form.

We designed the test on www.bakpax.com and shared it with the students from the experimental group so that they could enter the website and complete the test meanwhile getting accustomed to using online resources. The given website enabled us to allocate some minutes to complete it. Based on the results of the diagnostic test which gave us a comprehensive understanding of the gaps existing in our students' knowledge of Business English the focus of teaching shifted to the words and expressions which should be activated during our classes. We did not grade this test but mostly assessed it according to the percentage of correct answers. In this case, students were not interested in cheating as they understood that this showed their current knowledge and the problem of cheating disappeared, and this worked well.

After comparing some very result-oriented websites, we distinguished some websites that offered different toolkits and divided them according to our needs and language skills necessary to develop speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. We concentrated on the following platforms extensively used during the experiment. After every face-to-face lesson, we wanted to enhance their knowledge of the topic, so we registered our students on several websites, namely www.freshgrade.com, www.bakpax.com, www.nearpod.com as well as used some

boards for online discussions such as www.conceptboard.com and www.dotstorming.com and during online lessons we used online collaboration and competition tools like www.kahoot.com and www.quizziz.com.

We also considered it important for the students to have an online portfolio and understand their progress without asking us for their results or progress information all the time. For this reason, the website www.freshgrade.com offered the best solution where we could upload any assignment for our students, create classrooms for them and assign tasks for them to complete. The results of their work were visible to the lecturer who assessed them using the criteria previously defined for this or that task and the grade was visible to both the students and the lecturers. We could deliver the content, employ various approaches and methods, and keep the students under observation to gain better results. In this way, after each assignment, the students could see their progress and what was necessary to improve to get higher grades or identify weak points of their comprehensive knowledge to work later on. This also enabled us to focus on difficulties the students had faced in developing their language skills and direct the teaching process to fill in the knowledge gaps of the learners. The website allowed sending immediate feedback on the completed assignment so that the students could see the teacher’s comments and assessment and later improve all the weak points mentioned by the teacher.

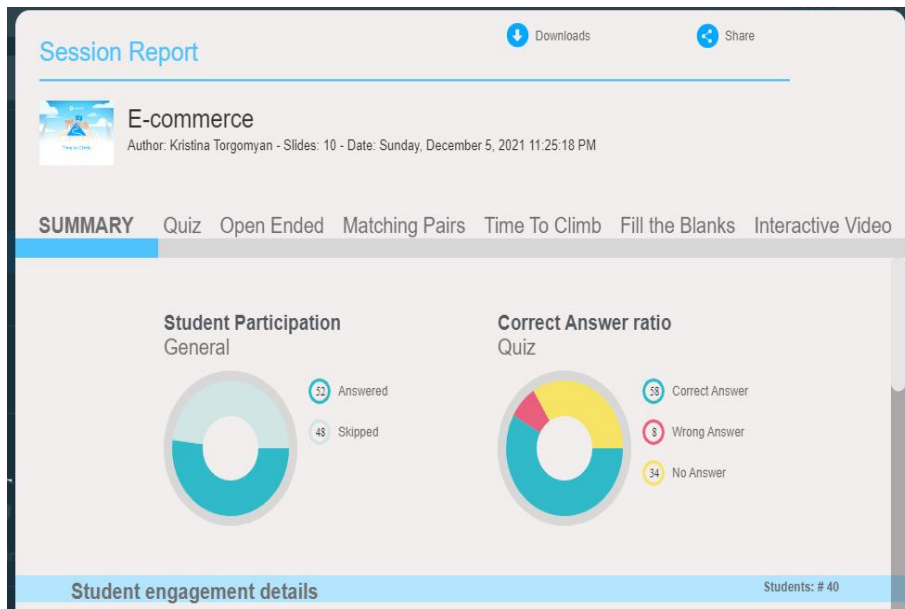


Picture 2: Image of the assignment completed by the student:
www.freshgrade.com

We assigned the students their homework by previously downloading the assignment and writing the instructions on how to complete the work and send it back to us via the same platform.

No matter how overloaded they were, students completed the assignments set with great enthusiasm, willingness and motivation. These factors greatly contributed to the positive attitude to the learning process and language acquisition. There are situations when students are shy to ask the lecturers to explain the unclear moments during offline lessons as they will be misjudged by their peers so these websites with the possibility to send and receive instant feedback will tremendously assist such students to acquire better knowledge and improve their skills, and the lecturers will have more opportunities to help and see the result of their industrious work.

The next online platform that is extremely interesting and efficient for blended learning is www.nearpod.com. The website allowed us to prepare complete lessons taking into account all the language skills to be improved by the students. The website also enabled us to prepare lessons embedded by tests and quizzes that were an effective option for us to check the overall understanding of the lesson. This was a real discovery for us to organize colorful, engaging, and motivating lessons and activities. The lecturer could create a complete lesson there, including all language skills and even more: activities could also include online dashboards with online collaboration, listening activities with different types of assignments, such as multiple choice, open question, true/false statements that made the listening not just listening, but listening for information, analysis, and understanding. This undoubtedly developed students' attention to what they listened to. Lecturers could also make assignments in the form of readings followed by activities such as quizzes, games, simulations, writing, paraphrasing, anything the lecturer considered appropriate to design. The whole lesson was the own work of the lecturers, any activity was authored by them and they could guide the lesson according to the needs of particular groups of students or even one student depending on his/her needs and level of motivation. We could write dozens of pages about this online platform, but we would like to share the link and visual representation would be more beneficial than hundreds of words written. The most useful tool on this website was that the lecturer could get the report on the performance of the groups of students, who participated in the lesson, either online during the lesson, or at home, at their own pace. This kept the lecturer on the pulse of students, and students were always immersed in English no matter the time of the day. This was a good solution for the lecturers who led their students to keep on the same wavelength during the whole year and not only during lessons at universities.



Picture 3 demonstrates the graphical representation of the report on the work of students on www.nearpod.com.

Here the students wrote their names and participated in the listening activity by choosing the right answer based on the listening video. So the lecturer could also monitor the success and progress of the students as well as their weak points.

We conducted our research during the first term of the 2021/2022 academic year, by previously diagnosing the level of English competency in two groups. After every two units of the textbook as well as online lessons organized for the experimental group, we tested the acquisition of the material to check their progress and in order to have more accurate results for both the experimental and control groups, we decided to conduct paper-based tests in the classroom during their lesson time. In this way, we tried to create equal conditions for both groups to objectively evaluate their progress. Overall, we conducted one diagnostic test and three progress tests and the results were somehow surprising as the group with blended learning (Actuarial and Financial Mathematics) demonstrated better knowledge and results during the tests. They increased their language competency from the lowest median of 34% (diagnostic test result) up to the highest 85% (final test result) which is the result of the mutual work of the lecturer and the students. The group with traditional classroom teaching (Information Technology specialty) increased their competence from median of 42% (diagnostic test result) up to 66% (final test result). We can highlight the fact that blended learning classroom

increased the median by 51%, whereas traditional classroom – only by 24%. Results speak louder than any definitions or expectations of educators. The percentage ratio was based on the correct answers given by the students.

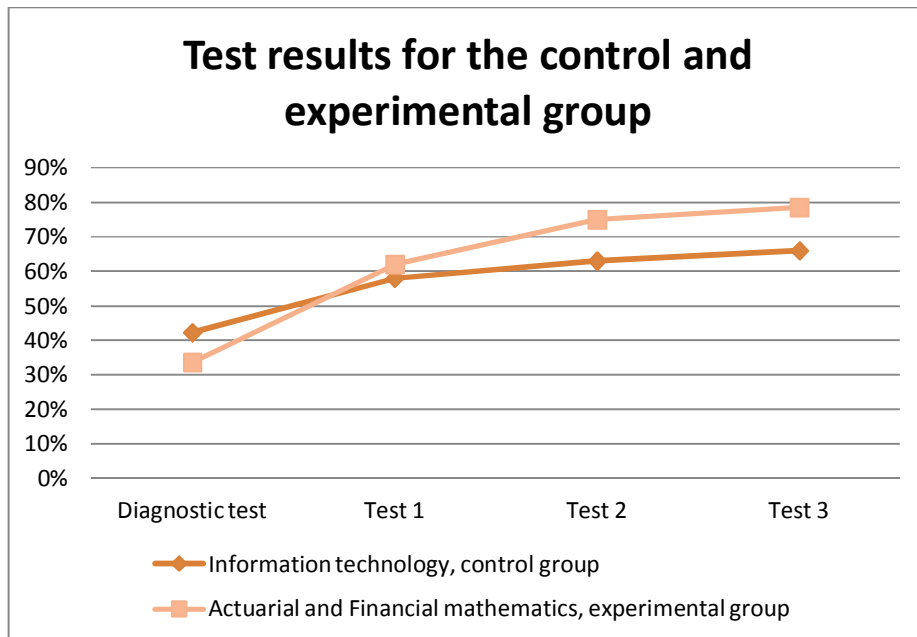
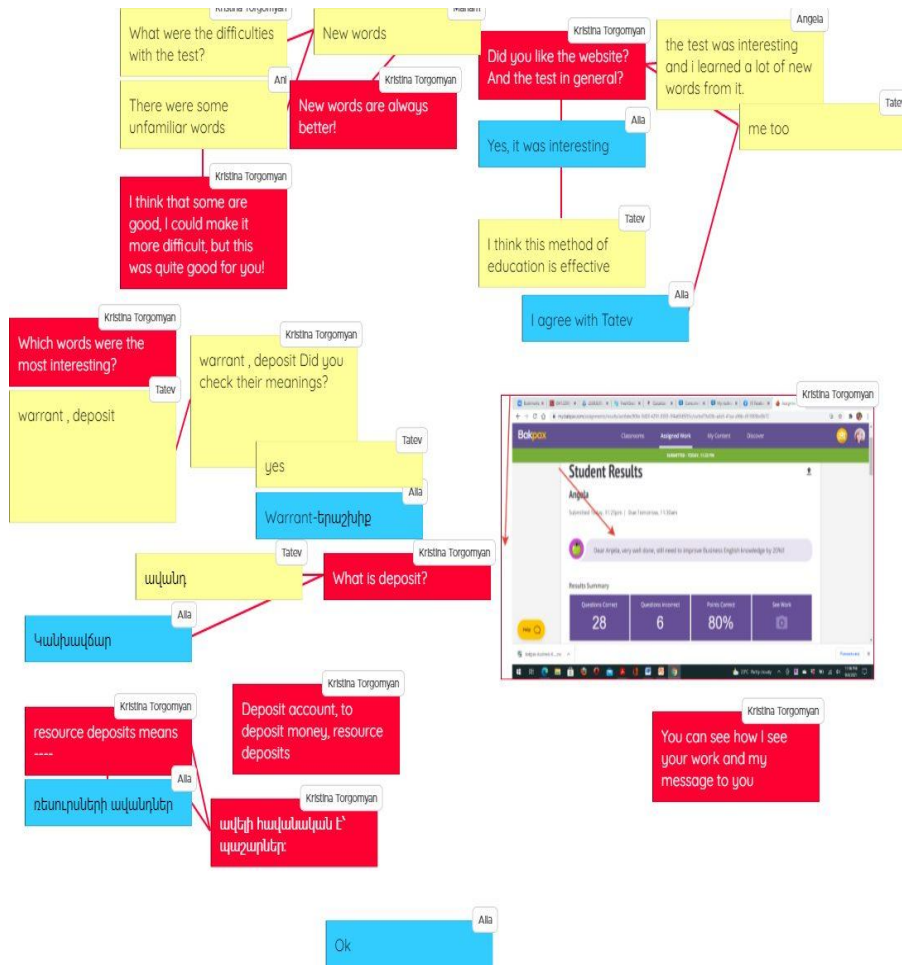


Diagram 1 – graphical representation of the test results and analysis of the groups participating in the experiment.

Concerning the other online platforms, namely www.dotstorming.com, and www.conceptboard.com, they are perfect online tools for online communication, exchange of ideas, peer chats, creativity developing skills and language skills enrichment. The groups usually get an invitation from the lecturer to join the board and start the discussion, and the topics chosen are based on the corresponding unit from the textbook already considered during the face-to-face lesson but with further developments and exchange of ideas and suggestions made by the lecturer to the students. We would also like to identify the possibility of www.conceptboard.com that also enabled us to embed a video from any website for the listening activities and to make discussions more lively and engaging. Students agreed or disagreed with the ideas presented in the video and shared with us. This tool is unavailable on www.dotstorming.com.



Picture 4: This is the illustration of the online collaboration and communication between the lecturer and the students from the experimental group on “Banking Industry” (Unit 8) /Harutyunyan, 2019: 82/ held online, via www.dotstorming.com.

Some people would doubt whether to use blended learning or not, however, according to the results of our research and experiment, we have identified the main points of the advantages of choosing this mode of teaching.

1. Although lecturers spend more time during this teaching modality, result-oriented lecturers can use it for their benefit. They will engage their students as the students will be completely immersed in the English atmosphere, not only because of the lecturer but the interest, fun and novelty that online platforms and resources

offer together with virtual reality and the possibility of using different gadgets that have become an inseparable part of modern generations.

2. All the websites we have introduced in the current analysis of the research and experiment are perfect for teaching goals and objectives and we should not pay much attention to one of its drawbacks – time devoted to online platforms and lesson developments – as the results can be promising, engaging and motivating. One more peculiarity is that in the course of online lesson development, lecturers also have fun and are fully engaged in the process. The challenge is double-sided and has an effect on both educators and students. This will involve every student in the learning process as they get interested in something new offered to them.

3. This watershed moment of the transfer to blended mode will become a trigger for better classroom management, on how to improve the quality of online and offline lessons, how to correctly allocate time for them, when to organize online instruction, and when – offline. This is completely the responsibility of lecturers. We can integrate IT organically into our teaching atmosphere and setting and cultivate students' English abilities.

Results of our research allow us to state that blended learning, if used efficiently, improves English language knowledge and acquisition even after the first semester at the university, with meeting just once a week. But the possibility to engage students in English atmosphere throughout the week reaps its results in the form of mutual work.

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Ս. ՉԱԼԱԲՅԱՆ, Բ. ԹՈՐԳՈՄՅԱՆ – Համակցված ուսուցման կիրառումը Հայաստանի պետական տնտեսագիտական համալսարանում անգլերենի դասավանդման ընթացքում. էքսպերիմենտից դեպի արդյունքներ. – Հոդվածի նպատակն է ներկայացնել անգլերենի դասավանդման ընթացքում ստացված փորձարարական հետազոտության տվյալները, ինչպես նաև համակցված ուսուցման մեթոդների կիրառման արդյունքում ուսուցման արդյունավետության բացահայտումը: Հոդվածում մանրակրկիտ ներկայացվում և քննարկվում են բազմաթիվ առցանց գործիքներ և հարթակներ, ինչպես նաև դրանց կիրառման եղանակները:

Հետազոտությունը իրականացվել է առաջին կուրսեցիների շրջանում, 2021-2022 ուսումնական տարվա առաջին կիսամյակում: Նախապես ստուգվել են անգլերենի նախնական գիտելիքները, իսկ մի քանի դաս հետո ձևավորող գնահատման (թեստեր) միջոցով փորձել ենք պարզել, թե որքան արդյունավետ է համակցված մեթոդի կիրառումը: Փորձարարական խմբի արդյունքները վկայում են այն մասին, որ լեզվի իմացության մակարդակը ավելի շատ է բարձրացել համակցված ուսուցման կիրառման դեպքում:

Բանալի բառեր. համակցված ուսուցում, առցանց գործիքներ, առցանց հարթակներ, արդյունավետություն, լեզվական հմտություններ, գնահատում, դասավանդման ձևաչափ

С. ЧАЛАБЯН, К. ТОРГОМЯН – *Применение смешанного обучения в процессе преподавания английского языка в Армянском государственном экономическом университете: от эксперимента к результатам.* – Цель статьи – представить данные, полученные в результате экспериментального исследования по применению и выявлению эффективности смешанного обучения в процессе преподавания английского языка для специальных целей посредством использования различных онлайн инструментов и платформ, которые детально проанализированы и представлены в статье.

Исследование было проведено среди первокурсников в течение первого семестра 2021/2022 учебного года. На диагностическом этапе были проверены входные знания и навыки учащихся, а после прохождения нескольких уроков, посредством формирующего оценивания (тестов) была выявлена эффективность применения смешанного обучения. Результаты экспериментальной группы свидетельствуют о том, что уровень знания языка был значительно выше при применении смешанного типа обучения, чем при обучении традиционным методом.

Ключевые слова: смешанное обучение, онлайн инструменты, онлайн платформы, эффективность, языковые навыки (виды речевой деятельности), оценка, формат обучения

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