

BLENDLED LEARNING AND ICT INTEGRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE FOR BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

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Motto:

*The future is the sum of all the
steps you take, including those
that are small, ignored or mocked at*
(Henri Coandă)

ABSTRACT. *Blended Learning and ICT Integration in Higher Education: The Case for Babeș-Bolyai University.* At a global level, blended learning as an efficient approach to transforming higher education has been extensively documented, especially in relation to the integration of technology. The present paper explores the status of teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes and ICT adoption in Babeș-Bolyai University and expresses the position of a teacher involved in building a blended learning environment towards its benefits, challenges and possible implementation in BBU.

Keywords: blended learning, ICTs, higher education, English for Specific Academic Purposes.

REZUMAT. *Învățarea mixtă și integrarea TIC în învățământul superior: argumente în favoarea utilizării lor la Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai.* La nivel global, există numeroase cercetări care atestă eficiența învățării mixte în procesul de transformare a învățământului superior, mai ales în contextul integrării TIC. Prezenta lucrare explorează statutul actual al predării englezei pentru scopuri specifice și academice și al adoptării TIC în Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai și exprimă poziția unui cadru didactic angajat în construirea unui mediu de învățare mixtă în ceea ce privește avantajele, dificultățile și posibila sa implementare în Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai.

Cuvinte cheie: învățare mixtă, TIC, învățământ superior, Engleza pentru scopuri specifice și academice.

Introduction

Initially a product of corporate training, for more than a decade blended learning has been under higher education researchers' and stakeholders intense

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scrutiny, with a growing corpus of studies, policy documents and project reports arguing its important role especially in relation to the process of ICT integration in tertiary education.

As far as Romania is concerned, the results of performing an Internet search using English and Romanian key words show low interest in this approach. However, Monsieur Jourdain's words "Good heavens! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing it!" may be used as a metaphor to represent a factual reality: similarly to their colleagues worldwide, Romanian teachers have been performing blended approaches to teaching in various forms. Yet, there does not seem to be notable research adopting recent definition(s) of the term, with its emphasis on the integration of technology in and impact on the learning environment or attempting to identify these practices.

Consequently, this paper will take a double stance. It will be *exploratory* in regards to the existing conditions and readiness for adoption of blended learning (BL) while expressing also the *position* of a higher education teacher involved in building a blended learning environment for teaching English for Specific (Academic) Purposes (ESAP) in a large Romanian university. After briefly introducing background information related to the status of foreign languages for specific purposes and to the current stage of ICT adoption in Babes-Bolyai University (BBU), a short section on blended learning will bring forth some general and specific aspects relevant to our present aim. In the footsteps of Garrison and Kanuka (2004) and Vaughan (2007), I will join those who support blended learning as an *efficient approach for transforming higher education*, with particular emphasis on its potential application in *teaching ESAP*, supporting it with my own experience during the long and winding journey from 'brick and mortar' (traditional class-based teacher-centred instruction) to 'bricks and clicks' (classroom based and web-enhanced student-centred instruction). The conclusions drawn from the specialist literature and from the process of implementing and developing a blended learning programme for teaching ESAP will serve as basis for some practical recommendations aimed at practitioners and at decision makers.

ESAP in Babes-Bolyai University: Provisions for the study of foreign languages

The provisions for the study of foreign languages in Romanian higher education, particularly English, have followed closely the developments needed to adjust to the changes affecting economy, society and education after the historical events in 1989 and into the new millennium.

The transition from a general English (GE) curriculum to one based on the principles underlying the teaching and learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) was triggered and

then fully supported by the British Council within the PROSPER governmental programme, which introduced international standards of the discipline by assisting Romanian university teachers to design in-house materials and review curricula and teaching strategies/methods. In parallel, new departments of applied and specialised modern languages were opened in Romania's largest academic centres (Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, Timisoara) offering courses for occupational / vocational purposes (Business, Medical, Legal, Tourism and Computer English) and setting up a number of projects related to the development and research on ESP and the Common European Framework for Languages² (CEFR). The next important step was to align Romanian foreign language policies at tertiary level to the changes brought about by the country's adoption of the Bologna system (2004) and subsequent admission to the EU (2007).

Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj pioneered a strategic language policy among the Romanian universities, adopted in 2001 and updated in 2006 in the aftermath of implementing the Bologna Declaration³. Foreign language proficiency certificates (CEFR level B2) are required for admission in the BA/MA/PhD programs, for participation in European mobilities and in attaining tenure. Among other things, this policy consisted of "provisions for the development of skills necessary for European citizens, such as communicational and (inter)cultural competences, and made references to self-learning and foreign languages for special purposes" (Oltean 2009).

In UBB, the Department of Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes (DFLSP), the Department of Applied Modern Languages for Economics and Business Administration, the foreign languages departments of the Faculty of Letters, as well as the Alpha and Lingua language centres are responsible for the implementation of the language policy and the monitoring and evaluation of students' linguistic skills, by delivering specialist courses for 2 to 4 semesters and managing language testing.

The generous provisions of the legal framework are reflected by the representations and attitudes towards the issue of language learning among students, academic staff and stakeholders. A study written by Professor Stefan Oltean (integrating results of DYLAN project for 2007 and 2008)⁴ highlights the points of convergence in relation to "the importance of studying them [foreign languages, n.a.], of having the possibility to choose between several languages, the number of modern languages to be studied (2/3 suggest two languages), the importance for graduates to have a language proficiency certificate, the importance of studying/teaching in widely spoken languages"

² See, for instance, *Equal Chances to European Integration through the use of the European Language Portfolio* at <http://www.prosper.ro/EuroIntegrELP/EurointegrELP.htm#materials>

³ See UBB web site: http://www.ubbcluj.ro/en/despre/strategii/politica_lingvistica.html

⁴ See Dylan project site: http://www.dylan-project.org/Dylan_en/home/home.php

(2009). On the other hand, divergences appear in issues pertaining mostly to curricular decisions and cost-effectiveness. For instance, students' demand for a higher number of semesters cannot be fully met because of tight scheduling of specialist subjects and teaching related expenses. As to the option for developing general or specific language skills/competences at BA and MA levels, the survey results are relatively balanced, with two thirds of the students and most academic staff choosing both for BA level. However, the study also reveals different perspectives on GE and ESP, with "students being less aware of the importance of widely spoken modern languages for reading scholarly literature, for research or cognition in general (which rank high in the academics' responses), and considering it more important to be knowledgeable in foreign languages for personal advantage, free movement and equal chances on the job market with other European citizens."(Oltean, 2009)

The issues of students' internationalisation and academic study/communication needs and teachers' continuous development as well as the new perspectives growing from the emerging paradigm of lifelong learning (CEC, 2008) have been constant challenges for faculty engaged in teaching ESAP, especially in specialisations pertaining to sciences and humanities. Among them, curricular adaptations, new courses/learning resources and new teaching approaches were designed to meet the final goal, making student learning happen.

Meanwhile, there have been major changes in worldwide education under the impact of the ICTs, which are reflected in the teaching of our discipline. The next section gives a brief account on technology adoption in BBU and its current status.

Information and Communication Technology Integration in Babes-Bolyai University

Starting with 1995, BBU has developed a basic information and communication structure (UBBNet) which includes web sites, laboratories and basic software, informatic systems for students (academic trajectory, webmail) and teachers, Internet access (cable and wireless), electronic libraries, and administrative management for registrars. In the late nineties (1998-1999), so called "non-traditional" academic programs were started: undergraduate studies for distance learning covering gradually a large variety of disciplines, then post-graduate studies, as well as continuing education and lifelong learning.⁵ In 2006, funds were allocated for developing an advanced IT system and a distance learning portal was set up in 2007, with administrative,

⁵ For more details, see <http://cfcid.ubbcluj.ro/invatamantladistanta/specializari.php> and <http://cfcid.ubbcluj.ro/index.php>

communicative and educational facilities.⁶ Between 2009 and 2011, an ambitious project comprising an e-learning web portal with system integration facilities, funded with European resources, was set in order to supply the necessary infrastructure for the developing of e-learning at university level: student access to syllabi, course readings and bibliographic services, student-teacher communication.⁷

Unfortunately, these massive financial commitments have not created a critical mass adoption of the ICT tools for teaching purposes and have not been reflected in targeted research. Similarly to situations noted by researchers worldwide, the main reason seems to be *the lack of policies and measures "to promote the use of online learning (e.g., by providing funding to encourage teaching staff to use online resources in their regular teaching practice; assigning to a dedicated unit responsibility for promoting the use of technology-based teaching; or providing the necessary infrastructural and training support to staff engaged in e-learning initiatives)"* and the creation of specialist centres "to assist the development of programmes for the enhancement of teaching and learning on-campus". (Curran, 2004). Another reason is the lack of support for ICT-related pedagogical experiments and research. To the best of our knowledge, there are very few empirical studies dedicated to the multiple aspects of ICTs utilization in, for example, distance learning or on the pedagogical implications of teaching online. Repeated attempts to find articles confirm the hypothesis that in this area, research is still based mostly in the technical field.⁸ Though not corroborated with empirical study, personal observation and regular interaction with distance learning students reveal low usage of the elearning system, which is limited to posting traditional course content and assignments and communication by mail.

On the other hand, local initiatives at the level of certain faculties and departments to use open source (for instance Moodle-based) learning management systems (journalism, sociology, etc.) and Web 2.0 tools may point to the reluctance to use a centralised, rigid e-learning system which does not cater for personalised and authentic learning environment and new pedagogical needs, as suggested by research (Hodges, 2011). Similarly, the relatively regular use of tools like mail and chat, social media (blogs, wikis, social networks, file and media sharing) show that both the information and the communication dimensions of technology development are being used for professional and personal development and as a supplement to traditional classes (Grosseck, 2009).

⁶ For more details, see see <http://it.ubbcluj.ro/index.htm> and <http://cc.ubbcluj.ro/despre/istoric.php>

⁷ For a description of the project, see project site: <http://granturi.ubbcluj.ro/ubb-online/index.php>

⁸ See, for instance, article index of the Romanian Journal of Human-Computer Interaction at <http://rochi.utcluj.ro/rrioc/en/overview.html>

In the field of language teaching, especially that of EFL and ESAP, the use of technology and CALL has been supported and stimulated by the huge amount of research in the fields of linguistics (with its psychological and social dimensions) and educational sciences. Over the years, DFLSP staff has used the available educational technology for various purposes, in line with discipline specific methodology⁹. The lack of adequate language learning instruments in the new increasingly mobile academic context was the main reason mentioned in the rationale of a project set up to meet European language policy and to consolidate the discipline by designing a set of CEFR-compatible textbooks for English, French, German, Russian and Romanian and available online as a free educational resource on the project site¹⁰. At B2 level, textbooks were built for academic study and communication (in areas such as life sciences, social sciences and sport).

Meanwhile, with English becoming a global communication tool due to the development of the Internet and Web 2.0, mobile communication and social media, more and more language learning e-content and e-learning systems to improve learning and motivate learners have been developed, which are widely accessible in sharing systems and as open educational resources. In time, such resources have been gradually incorporated in ESAP courses either as authentic materials for classroom teaching or supplemental materials for self-paced, autonomous learning.¹¹

Equally impossible to disregard are the growing number of available research studies and reports pointing out what has become common knowledge for all higher education stakeholders worldwide: (1) universities can no longer ignore the societal trends brought about by technological advance, (2) educational change does not depend directly on technology (which currently has become more reliable and stable, but on the approach taken by the human factor, and (3) pedagogical implications of technology are at the heart of and the greatest challenges in this process.

This knowledge and the resources already in place for language learning and technology integration in UBB were the initial premises that supported the author's first attempt to adapt the ESAP teaching/learning environment to the new requirements by adopting blended learning as a strategy of transition to what is commonly labelled "21st century education".

⁹ Jeremy Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2007 (see Chapter 11, on educational technology)

¹⁰ "Didactics of Modern Languages and Romanian as a Foreign Language in Higher Education; Strategies of Alignment to the European Linguistic Policy" (CNCSIS project, 2006-2008) <http://granturi.ubbcluj.ro/autodidact/AutoDidact.pdf>

¹¹ See, for instance, English4pleasure (<http://english4pleasure.wikispaces.com/>) and grammartour (<http://grammartour.wikispaces.com/>), two wiki-based sites offering supplemental resources for learning.

The following two sections consist of a brief outline of basic concerns related to blended learning as they emerge after reviewing specialist literature and the author's own experience.

Blended Learning and Higher Education

Developed initially in corporate training as a cost-effective method for short-term courses (Bersin, 2004; Sharpe, 2006), blended learning has been widely and thoroughly researched especially after 2000 by leading higher education institutions and policy making bodies worldwide mostly in the context of the increase of online education provisions (Bonk, 2004) and with view to maximizing educational opportunities. Due to the complex nature of the issue (which practically brings into discussion the whole educational process), discussions on blended learning cover a wide variety of aspects ranging from definitions, models, benefits and challenges and its effects on the learning environment at local, regional and global levels: administration, faculty, students, the process of learning and its outcomes.

According to Vaughan (2007) and Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004), blended learning, also known as hybrid learning and mixed-mode instruction, has been going on for a long while due to the complex nature of teaching/learning. However, at the beginning of the new millennium, the development of technology (especially the rapid expansion of the Internet and the increased accessibility of personal computers and mobile devices), the adoption of online/distance learning programmes, and the research in and developments of new learning theories (with emphasis on action theory, social constructivism and connectivism) brought forth practices and discussions on the notable shift going on in pedagogical approaches (from the teacher-centred into a student-centred) and the disruptions in the social, political and cultural aspects of education (Siemens, 2009).

Similarly, the new perspective brought about by the development of the lifelong learning paradigm has become more pervasive, with its emphasis on the role of social learning (by cooperation and association) and knowledge networks via digital media and their role in society at large (personal, education, employment) contributed to the extension of the context: "Again, it is important to argue that so-called 'new learning' in schools, departing from classical classroom education is not only related to the new opportunities brought by ICT but has much broader cultural roots in processes of individualization, cultural differentiation and emancipation." (Study on the Social Impact of ICT, 2010).

In 2001, Harvi Singh, researcher and promoter of blended learning in corporate training, noticed that "it is not the mixing and matching" that should prevail in defining blended learning but the focus on "learning and outcome."

As a result, his definition concentrated on “optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the ‘right’ learning technologies to match the ‘right’ personal learning style to transfer the ‘right’ skills to the ‘right’ person at the ‘right’ time” (Singh, 2001). Thus, the focus will be on the learning objectives and outcomes (and not necessarily on the delivery method) and emphasis is laid on learning styles, experience and strategy.

Another researcher to acknowledge that blended learning is very difficult to define because it “means different things to different people” is Driscoll (2002) but she considered this as an advantage and a sign of “untapped potential”. Her frequently cited list comprises several combinations that could be defined as blended learning:

- To combine or mix modes of web-based technology (e.g. virtual classroom) to accomplish an educational goal.
- To combine various pedagogical approaches (e.g. constructivism, behaviourism, etc.) to produce an optimal learning outcome with or without instructional technology.
- To combine any form of instructional technology (e.g. video tape, etc.) with face-to-face instructor led training.
- To mix or combine instructional technology with actual job tasks in order to create a harmonious effect of learning and working.

On the other hand, there are authors like Oliver and Trigwell that see the difficulties of defining blended learning as a weakness. In their article, “Can ‘Blended Learning’ Be redeemed?”, they note that the term is approached mostly from the ‘blend’ perspective (forms of instruction, teaching and pedagogies) with the corollary that ‘learning’ is seldom taken into consideration. They offer a way to “redeem” the concept, by advancing a theory of variance of learners’ experience (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005).

The “transformative potential” of blended learning for higher education has been emphasised by authors such as Garrison and Hanuka and large scale research reports (Sharpe et al., 2006; Blended Learning, 2007), have confirmed it especially in relation to the process of building “the right blend”, or “the best of the two worlds”. Moreover, as in most cases when solutions are based on negotiation, blended/hybrid courses are likely to attract all parties involved, whether they have been or not converted to technology-enhanced learning. The well known success stories of universities such as Wisconsin¹² and University of Central Florida¹³, blended programs in British higher education, as well as research studies attest the presence of “dialogic and reflexive practice” on the blend of pedagogical approaches as an

¹² See website for hybrid courses at: <http://www4.uwm.edu/ltc/hybrid/>

¹³ See their Blended Learning Toolkit, an open resource for institutions interested in developing blended programs at <http://blended.online.ucf.edu/>

increasingly important dimension whereby the transformative potential is becoming the most productive.

All in all, according to the report reviewing practices in the UK, three main trends are available for better understanding the term and its practical application across higher education worldwide:

- The provision of supplementary resources for learning programmes that are conducted along predominantly traditional lines, through institutionally supported virtual learning environments.
- Transformative course level practices underpinned by radical course designs which often make significant use of technology to replace other modes of teaching and learning.
- A holistic view of technology and learning, including the use of the learners' own technologies to support their learning. (Sharpe, 2006, 19).

These three represent models and also stages in implementation. A well known example of building a blended learning environment is The Blended Learning Initiative (BLI) launched in 2004 by Pennsylvania State University "to enhance the undergraduate experience by creating both online and hybrid versions of key Pennsylvania State courses. These re-designed courses will improve instructional effectiveness and increase flexibility of course offerings for both students and faculty." Aimed at large enrolment graduate courses, BLI had as main objectives to attract new students and improve retention, to offer "flexibility and convenience for students through the integration of face-to-face instruction with online learning communities", "enhance quality and effectiveness, (...) contributing to a more engaged student experience", to "test and assess new pedagogies that centre around active, inquiry-based, resource-oriented learning through the creation of virtual learning communities that will improve the student experience, and to position the university to respond to high-demand workforce and economic needs of Pennsylvania."¹⁴

The three models/stages (supplemental, replacement and emporium) used by BLI were similar to the previously mentioned trends and were meant to gradually transform the teaching, learning, and organisational environment by using "the best of all worlds".

This and other more recent tertiary education¹⁵ examples show that, even if started much earlier than in Romania, the process of change is extremely complex and time-consuming. Still, we consider that the lessons learned worldwide are invaluable resources for all parties interested in improving higher education, particularly in providing a rich learning experience for

¹⁴ See BLI web site: <http://weblearning.psu.edu/blended-learning-initiative>. See also the experience of the University of Milwaukee: http://www4.uwm.edu/lrc/hybrid/faculty_resources/advantages.cfm

¹⁵ See, for instance, the 2011 report on Canadian higher education adoption of blended learning at <http://cohere.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/REPORT-ON-BLENDED-LEARNING-FINAL1.pdf>

students. In the following section, the author's experience as an early adopter of technology-enhanced teaching and the steps taken to integrate new teaching approaches to ESAP in a blended course format will be described.

From 'Brick and Mortar' to 'Bricks and Clicks' in BBU

As stated in the introduction and in the previous section, current approaches to blended learning cover a wide variety of issues related mostly to the benefits and challenges of technology integration as well as of its effects on human learning. However, while Romanian research on the use of social media and their impact on higher education is fairly abundant¹⁶, the lack of studies conducted from blended learning perspective prevents us to comment on its occurrence in Romanian higher education¹⁷. No doubt, in spite of the absence of explicit policies regarding this subject, the change is underway. As mentioned earlier, instances of blended approach occur in various guises in distance learning programs, in the regular use of open source platforms for learning management (for instance Moodle) and of various Internet tools and social media for communication. To the best of our knowledge, the project "Continuous training for higher education teachers by blended learning"¹⁸ is among the very few to overtly mention blended learning as used for continuous education purposes. An extremely ambitious project is in progress at the Faculty of Letters, with blended method used for primary and secondary school teachers' training to use the CEFR for teaching Romanian as second language.¹⁹ Hopefully, research on its impact on teachers' training will be issued.

The final part of our article will give a brief account of the author's attempt to implement a blended learning environment in teaching English for Specific Academic Purposes to undergraduate students of BBU (Faculty of Sociology and Social Work). This account aims to highlight the benefits and the challenges encountered in the process, with the suggested corollary that, blended learning approach is not only a viable solution for integrating technologies and new media in our university, but, given the existing circumstances, it can be put into practice provided that institutional support is made available.

In order to present briefly our project, we have adopted some elements present in a framework for the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of ICT projects in education, as suggested in Cabrol and Severin (2009, pp. 83-87). The main assumption of this framework is that "the goal of

¹⁶ See, for instance, the contributions of Carmen Holotescu, Gabriela Grosseck, Anisoara Pop, Elvira Popescu.

¹⁷ A notable exception is the study written by Stanca et al. in 2008.

¹⁸ See web site of the project at <http://blu.cc.unibuc.ro/>

¹⁹ See web site and e-learning platform at <http://www.didacticalimbiromane.ro/>

all education is student learning” and measurements should aim at learning outcomes that show “students’ involvement in and commitment to learning” as well as changing of learning/teaching practices that are “directly linked to the impact and the development of either general skills or ‘21st century skills’, including an understanding of ICT skill acquisition.” (p. 85).

In terms of **inputs**, there are five domains brought into discussion: infrastructure, resources (curriculum, content, tools), support, training (human resources), management, and policies.

Infrastructure, resources, and support: The course²⁰ used a blend of *delivery* and *technology* modes, namely face-to-face meetings in the *classroom* (equipped with computer, overhead projector and broadband connectivity to the Internet) and *wiki-based* asynchronous activities. Based on our own experience from the previous year (2009) and evidence of successful use of Web 2.0 tools in language learning (Felea, Stanca, 2010, 2011) we used the wiki hosting service Wikispaces due to its user-friendly interface and easy management²¹. In terms of *curricular decisions*, the blend comprised *traditional classroom* presentations of core concepts and communicative pair/group work activities and of tutorials for wiki use (individual/group work). Learning materials were available in *print* handout format and on the wiki platform. The *online component* comprised self-paced learning activities based on teacher resources (learning units) and third-party internet-based practice. The wiki specific features sustained *interactivity* (student to student and student to teacher) and *collaboration*. As to pedagogical support for the learners, tutorials and teacher guiding offered ongoing support and regular feedback.

Since they pertain mostly to institutional decision, inputs related to **training, management** and **policies** were only partially controlled by the author. Personal agency can be invoked in the case of teacher performance in terms of ICT competence, ICT use for education and application of new pedagogies, which can be developed by means of a personal learning plan²². Personal initiative may also influence local (department, in our case) administrative decisions and, by dissemination of results, attract all the actors involved. However, the major challenges of integrating technology concern management and policies, which depend largely on institutional decision at university and national level. Factors like lack of support for planning and linking the course project to broader scale initiatives and lack of budget/incentives for continuity and development of other (similar or complementary) initiatives may generally act as deterrents for most teachers.

²⁰ As implemented in the academic years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011.

²¹ See course site at <http://englishforacademicpurposes2.wikispaces.com/>

²² Mostly developments of internet-based social learning. Personal learning plans and environments (PIPs and PLEs) are designed to place learning under the control of the individual.

However, the **processes** and **products** developed with this minimal input, as well as the **impact on student learning**, sustain our initial hypothesis. For instance, in terms of technical equipment, the wiki platform is freely available and accessible anytime and anywhere by means of Internet school and home access. It does not need any investment and requests only basic ICT skills both in development and use. Moreover, its features support easy revision and automatic collection of user data. As to curriculum development, the blend allowed us to adjust the traditional curriculum to include transversal competencies: ICT and self-directed (autonomous) learning. Assisting students to access a wide variety of readily available educational resources in ESAP and to evaluate and use them was the major process at the heart of the blended learning initiative. Additionally, wiki-based individual assignments (assessed semester-long individual page edits consisting of sharing personal information and homework) and collaborative work allowed monitoring of project progress from what the framework calls the stage of *emergent* usage of ICT to *application and integration* at least in three crucial areas, namely teacher/student practices, student involvement and development of skills and competencies.

Firstly, the blend allowed a shift from teacher-centred to student-centered classes, where *teacher roles gradually changed* into presenter and tutor offering support for off-line and online activities.

Secondly, we believe that, in spite of medium to low attendance of face-to-face meetings and uneven online presence (namely a slow start and increased frequency after mid semester and at the end of the semester, which is a typical behaviour due to assessment constraints), wiki statistics and students' achievements (as reflected by the results of their online activity) show *increased involvement and development of transversal competencies* needed in academic and lifelong learning settings (communication, collaboration, ICT use, problem solving).

In terms of discipline-specific achievements, the outcome-based design of the course also allowed students to *overcome language barriers* by accessing and evaluating authentic materials and creating original content on the wiki. Similarly, activities designed for autonomous/independent and reflective learning assisted them in *becoming aware of and developing language learning skills* such as self-assessment, setting learning objectives, finding resources. All of these can be found in most recommendations aimed at teachers who want to implement blended learning.

A survey and a statistical analysis of their answers confirmed that the wiki environment was adopted successfully by the group of students who had more advanced computer and Internet skills, a fairly good level of English and were adepts of collaborative learning (Felea, Stanca, 2010).

All in all, by promoting task-oriented and project based learning based on authentic materials and developing learners' autonomy and life-long

learning skills (e.g. collaboration), the blended ESAP course managed to fulfil at least partially the requirements of effective course design and to bring about first results on the way to adopting a new teaching/learning paradigm.

Conclusions: “Blended learning is a journey rather than a destination”

The ongoing concerns for aligning Romanian higher education to European policies regarding the study of foreign languages and the information and technology integration are reflected in BBU strategic policies. However, the large investments in ICT structures (from broadband connectivity to learning management systems) have not yielded “interest” in terms of mass adoption for teaching purposes and targeted research. At micro level, changes affecting tertiary education in terms of higher enrolment, larger classes, fewer semesters for language learning, and various proficiency levels represent challenges facing ESAP teachers in their efforts to meet requirements of university language policies, to attain European higher education area standards of quality and cater for students’ increasingly diverse needs.

Against this context and based on international literature, our paper argues that blended learning may be a viable strategy for integrating technology to maximize learning opportunities adapted to latest societal trends, for updating curricula and pedagogical approaches.

The author’s experience in creating a blended environment confirmed the benefits of blended learning in an ESAP Course: pedagogical richness, access to knowledge, social interaction, personal agency, cost effectiveness and ease of revision (Osguthorpe, Graham, 2003). Still, lack of national/institutional awareness and policies, no support for teachers involved in technology integration were perceived as major barriers. The relatively little research directed to pedagogical implications of using technology in full time or distance learning programmes in UBB makes things even more difficult.

Finally, some brief suggestions related to bottom-top and top-to-bottom changes are presented. They are based on the literature but mostly on the needs perceived by the author during the implementation of the blended course.

Practitioners/faculty: start small and keep technology simple; focus on design and not technology by reconsidering your goals and connecting class and online activities; by all means, use the existing resources; do not do it alone, get feedback from colleagues and other interested faculty; manage your students’ expectations by helping them face the technical or time management issues; plan carefully and be flexible about adjustments²³; create community of interest for professional development by drawing on social media provisions.

²³ For more advice and tips, see, for instance the page on blended learning course design tips at <https://sites.google.com/a/idahopd.org/blended-learning/tips> and at http://www4.uwm.edu/ltc/hybrid/faculty_resources/questions.cfm

Institution/administration: conduct small-scale and large-scale assessments of current ICT practices and integration readiness, as well as a revision of policies regarding teacher training and support in view of adopting technology; develop an understanding of blended learning potential in the process of transforming the teaching, learning, and organisational environment by drawing on specialist literature, best and worst practices; support innovative practices and research by creating a dedicated unit specialist centre to promote the use of technology-enhanced teaching across the institution, with special emphasis on developing new specific disciplines such as web instruction and design; take first steps towards adopting a clear policy towards these issues both at local and at national levels. As the blended learning approach provides a well researched and tried-and-tested framework, the outcomes make the journey worthwhile.

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