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LANGUAGE LEARNING IN BLENDED AND TANDEM WITH BRAZILIAN PARTNERS: FLEXIBLE LEARNING MODELS

ENSINO DE LÍNGUAS EM BLENDED E TANDEM COM PARCEIROS BRAZILEIROS: MODELOS DE ENSINO FLEXÍVEIS

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ABSTRACT: This case study aims at arriving at a thorough understanding of the complexities at issue for the implementation and development of the in-curriculum discipline of English in the School of Business and Hospitality in a Brazilian university targeting internationalization. On top of that, the program has a technological approach, which is, in other words, the use of technology (specifically ICT) as pivotal to maximize learning opportunities through a flexible delivery of instructions. The program was primarily designed by the approach of blended learning, but this case study also describes a merge with tandem learning in which it was a pilot project. I initially present theories that have framed this research. Next, I share my experience teaching and coordinating the program, and then I make some considerations about positive aspects and upcoming challenges

KEYWORDS: Computer-Assisted Language Learning; blended learning; tandem learning; Systemic-Functional Linguistics; ICT.

RESUMO: O presente estudo de caso tem como objetivo chegar a uma extensa compreensão das complexidades em questão para a implementação e o desenvolvimento da disciplina curricular de Inglês na Escola de Negócios e Hospitalidade de uma universidade brasileira, visando a sua internacionalização. Além disso, o programa tem uma abordagem tecnológica, ou seja, o uso da tecnologia (especificamente TIC) como elemento crucial para maximizar oportunidades de aprendizagem através de um modelo flexível de ensino. O programa foi principalmente desenvolvido com enfoque na abordagem do *blended learning*. No entanto, este estudo de caso também descreve uma mesclagem com o *tandem learning* num projeto piloto. Inicialmente, são apresentadas as teorias que enquadram a pesquisa; em seguida, compartilhamos nossa experiência de ensino e coordenação do programa para, então, fazer algumas considerações sobre aspectos positivos e desafios futuros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aprendizagem mediada pelo computador; *blended learning*; *tandem learning*; Linguística Sistemico-Funcional; TIC.

1 Introduction

Over recent years educators and researchers from a number of countries have mastered the infusion of Information and Communication Technology (henceforth ICT) into their classrooms to teach second and foreign languages. There are basically two ways of

addressing the matter: (1) an ever-increasing but incomplete body of research that spotlights educational approaches integrated with ICT as a central piece for learning; and (2) the use of ICTs as tools. The former usually makes students actively immersed in language learning in multiple ways through activities, procedures and techniques. The latter hold up ICT perspectives as bridging student-teacher relationship that remains largely unchanged; perspectives that are reinforced and repeated in school curricula worldwide.

Assuming technology is an integrative part of our society, ICT can no longer be seen as a mere add-on in language learning practices. In this line of thought, many programs have been considering a technological approach to teach English Foreign Language (hereafter EFL), with the sought-after constructivist approach overlaying ongoing educational practices these days. For example, Edirippulige et al. (2013) link technology to the constructivist teaching methods because it enhances and speed up the students' phases of self-regulation: Forethought, Volitional Control and Self-reflection. The first stage, known as Object-regulation, is that learners are often controlled by or by using objects in their environment in order to think; and technology provides a ton of manipulative objects for this purpose. The second stage, also termed Other-regulation, includes implicit and explicit mediation; and technology scaffolds or even role-plays mediations with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and so on. The final stage, Self-regulation, specify the ability to accomplish activities with minimal or no external support; and technology sets the stage for Self-regulation, which is only made possible through internalization (ZIMMERMAN, 1990).

A number of studies have validated the contribution of ICT to EFL/ESL teaching (e.g. BRIERLEY, 1991; BOSWOOD, 1997; LEE et al., 2005; BEATTY, 2013). The vast spectrum of researches weighs the ICT positive effects moving forward, though, with all the remarkable challenges in view. In this sense, Dudeney & Hockly (2007) highlight the slow change of teachers' mindset as an important negative factor; however, they demonstrate positive aspects that will exert an influence on teaching and what the future of technologies might hold for ELT in the following years (summarized):

- High numbers of teachers and students versed in multiple technologies;
- Generation of teachers and professionals that have already studied through distance learning;
- Better software, tools and devices alongside to the Web 2.0 boom;
- Highly sophisticated technology present in everyday life activities;
- Higher levels of technology have made significant inroads in academics to Gen M;
- Huge growth of education and training through web-based environments (c.f. SCHMID et al., 2014).

That said, the overarching goal of this paper is to present a case study of a technological approach to EFL teaching as an in-curriculum discipline to undergraduate students in Brazil. The program was primarily designed by the approach of blended learning, but this case study also offers a merge with tandem learning in which was a pilot project. The outcomes were examined to determine feasibility, time, cost, adverse events,

and effect size based on two notions: (1) multifarious methodologies custommized in programs' design as a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of the technology used to language teaching and learning; and (2) broaden perspective of learning centered in the technological approach. I did not set out to provide readers in these few short pages with an all-encompassing research-informed study about ICT applied to language education. I might be circumspect in trying to shed light on additional language learning circumstances by showing a proven effective way of addressing EFL in this specific context.

In pursuance of detecting cultural and personality traces of the cohort as distance learning partners, the theoretical framework of Systemic-Functional Linguistics was applied to analyze interactions of students who underwent tandem learning.

The following section briefly discusses some technological advances and varied educational approaches that have influenced and modelled language learning the way it is practiced today.

2 Technology and English Language Teaching

The modern world speed and the paradigms built around new social habits in an era of great information exchange and fast-paced technological progress impose the researcher the gruelling task of recognizing the best approaches and methodologies based on detailed and accurate studies of studentship and educational goals.

This paper, for example, gets to wind down by its publication, whereas in different parts of the globe new ICTs and software are being developed and used in varying ways to teach and learn languages. Yet, the validity of such studies is readily aligned with Leffa's thought that "no approach contains all the truth and no one carries out so much that it cannot evolve. The wise stance is to incorporate the new to the old; the greater or lesser degree of accommodation will depend on the context in which the teacher is subjected to, his/her experience and knowledge" (1988, p. 16).

a) English as an International Language

The ad hoc English as a Lingua Franca is quite consolidated. After Kachru circles (1992), many studies about standards of English have burgeoned. In 2003, McKay estimated that "by 2025 there would (*will* from the original) be more speakers of English as a second language than speakers of English as a first language". In 2009, Jenkins stated that the ESL speakers had already outnumbered native speakers (NS). From this perspective, English flourishes due to massive international businesses and increasing migration. Notwithstanding the ideal conditions settling English as a Lingua Franca, significant hurdles turn up from this, with particular reference to the development of materials and technologies, followed by changes in teaching practices and methodologies aiming a new reference model based on non-native speaker (NNS) standards (FERGUSON, PÉREZ-LLANTADA; PLO, 2011).

The above-mentioned studies add up to a growing body of research that has been settling patterns of teachability, comprehensibility and demands. A good example thereof is

The Lingua Franca Core proposed by Jennifer Jenkins (2000) – about phonological features – which tries to redefine and re-classify pronunciation error, and in so doing to embrace the sociolinguistic facts of regional variation. Jenkins' proposal recognizes the rights of NNSs to their own legitimate regional accents rather than regarding deviation from NS pronunciation norms as 'error' (c.f. SPICER-ESCALANTE, 2011). McKay (op. cit.) follows this rationale by admitting an escalating anglocentric rejection around the sense that the NS model is no longer the ultimate goal of learning English. The breakdown in NNS-NNS/NNS-NS talk can be extended to levels of grammar (TALMY, 2012) and semantics (KECSKES, 2008), and in due time it demands adaptive ICTs to incorporate the NNS communicative diversity.

b) E-learning enhanced by Language Learning Technologies

E-learning is a term widely used to describe learning that happens using technology – tablets, iPads, PCs, smartboards, laptops, etc. (DUDENEY; HOCKLY, 2007). E-learning can be a way to teach anywhere at any time to anybody (Ibid.). Throughout the years a lot of terms and acronyms were coined to describe variations of E-learning, and their boundaries can be determined by three main factors:

Interaction

The core distinction here refers to synchronous or asynchronous interactions. Some authors (e.g. BAPORIKAR, 2013, CLEVELAND-INNES; GARRISON, 2010) argue that, after a second and third waves of highly sophisticated technologies (p.ext. ICTs) took over the globe last century, real-time interactions have forced the redefinition of E-learning: "Electronic learning is not only a kind of virtual or distance education to deliver content by electronic means [...], but it is aimed at effective learning in real time" (BAPORIKAR, 2013, p. 22).

Technology

The acronym ICT (Information Communication Technology) has been adopted as an umbrella term to make reference to technology applied to educational purposes. However, ICT for language learning has a twofold aspect of tool or environment. To be specific, for these purposes, we can either wrap up E-learning concepts and subdivisions as tools, for instance, M-learning (E-learning using mobiles), CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), and CBT (Computer-Based Training); or consider technology under the notion of environment, for example, VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), LMS (Learning Management System), WBT (Web-Based Training), and SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model). Lately, many language programs have been getting on the bandwagon of Web 2.0 (O'REILLY, 2007), which has become a buzzword in education to designate a second generation of communities and services, with the concept of the web as platform.

Methodologies & Approaches

In dealing with this aspect, the basic distinction is regarding autonomous or mediated learning. The assumption of levels of autonomy is key to determine modalities of

E-learning: open learning, online learning, blended learning, etc.

When it comes to definitions of methodologies, approaches, principles and techniques there is sort of a disagreement among scholars and researchers. The Anthony's model (ANTHONY, 1963, p. 63-67 apud RICHARDS; RODGERS, 2014, p. 15) presents techniques carrying out a method, which is consistent with an approach. Richards and Rodgers (1986) propose a different hierarchy where method is atop and is put together through approaches, designs and procedures. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) define the “techniques” as the methods or actions teachers carry out in the classroom, and the “principles” as the thoughts (beliefs, attitudes, values, and awareness). This paper won't go deep into the details of this discussion. Otherwise, it is as satisfactory as important to understand that we build effective learning around methodologies, approaches, principles and techniques combined properly. For example, a teacher can use mobiles to conduct a webinar, adopting the communicative approach in a context of tandem learning. Together, these methodologies, approaches, principles and techniques purposely accomplish educational goals in a critical pedagogical framework.

Likewise, some educational programs try to marry teaching approaches and methods with technology. A good example is the TELE (Technology Enhanced Learning Environments), which focuses on a student-centred model of education integrating themes that are given real-life applicability through technologically supported delivery methods. TELEs are educational environments in which students are immersed in “learning by doing” with an emphasis on learning based upon constructivist pedagogy (HANNAFIN; LAND, 1997).

A discussion now follows about two methodological approaches that are important to this case study.

3 Blended & Tandem Learning

Blended and tandem learning are two E-learning subdivisions of paramount importance. Blended learning, or B-learning, makes extensive use of learning technologies through the “blend” of physical and virtual environments in order to supplement traditional face-to-face (F2F) learning (BERSIN, 2004). The growing popularity of blended learning presupposes its success. On the other hand, the transition from traditional F2F to blended learning is not trivial, with challenges for both students and instructors (GARRISON; KANUKA, 2004).

According to Bersin (2004), the blended learning model has been used both in basic and higher education. The common model in most open universities around the world contains paradoxes (GURI-ROSENBLIT; GROS, 2011), the most central of which is the gap between teachers/instructors and course designers. Even though issues are noticeable, as of today, B-learning is considered the most effective model for E-learning with far-reaching social implications (e.g. DUHANEY, 2004; GRAHAM, 2013).

A wide variety of B-learning models are described in the literature (e.g. THORNE, 2003; BONK; GRAHAM, 2012). Staker and Horn (2012) propose four types of pedagogic models ranging from a more brick-and-mortar to a more online orientation. These models are (summarized):

- (1) Rotation model – students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher’s discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning.
- (2) Flex model – content and instruction are delivered primarily by the Internet. The teacher provides face-to-face support on a flexible and adaptive as-needed basis. Some implementations have substantial F2F support though.
- (3) Self-Blend model – students choose to take one or more courses entirely online to supplement their traditional courses.
- (4) Enriched-Virtual model – a whole-school experience in which within each course students divide their time between brick-and-mortar and online delivery of content and instruction. It differs from the Flex Model because students seldom attend the brick-and-mortar campus every weekday.

Regarding tandem learning, it happens when native speakers of two different languages (ideally each learner is a native speaker in the language the proponent wants to learn) work together in order to learn each other’s language and develop the knowledge of the target culture and community. In line with Guth and Thomas (2010), tandem learning has the cultural integration as an indispensable part of the language learning process. As a result, more than helping one another improving language skills, “the approach is a form of open learning whereby partners learn more about one another’s character and culture and exchange additional knowledge – for example, about their professional life” (BRAMMERTS, 1996, p. 34).

O’Dowd (2007) establishes two basic distinctions for language learning in tandem: (1) both partners can meet in person (face-to-face tandem); or (2) learn by email, phone, web-based or other media (E-tandem, also termed Distance Tandem). In addition, there are different uses of the tandem method that promote independent learning, such as Tandem Partnerships (two people, supported by counsellors), Binational Tandem Courses (for groups, organised by moderators), and E-mail Tandem (e-mails exchange).

Why opt for blended learning?

Given the huge canvas of studies about B-learning, many scholars argue it merges the best of E-learning combined with traditional learning approaches, but for all that, some rigorous sifting finds it can equally combine disadvantages of both environments/approaches if not well executed (GRAHAM, 2013). More often than not, language programs seem to take a restrictive approach because students may prefer total on-campus experience, while others go for fully online learning. Therefore, an important facet of the blended approach is the adaptability to students’ expectations and learning styles across the board.

Another important factor to consider is the protagonism. Following a constructivist approach, B-learning conceives students as the centrepiece of the learning process. They have the means to control when, where, how and with whom they will study. Of course, the teacher is still a much-needed presence in the wake of misconceptions for reliable supervision and teaching.

Why opt for tandem learning?

Among the many advantages of tandem learning, perhaps the most important is the

development of the intercultural competence from countries the world over. According to O'Dowd (2007), tandem fosters a change of perspective, with comparison of one's own and foreign points of view. This cross-cultural and cross-border understanding suits the Social Needs level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) perfectly. The margin for new friendships is associated with the sense of belongingness as a psychological factor to increase students' motivation. Baumeister and Leary (1995) posit that belongingness (p.ext. social acceptance) is a universal desire, and such a fundamental human motivation that we feel severe consequences of not belonging.

With regard to language aspects, Brammerts (1996) observed that students subjected to tandem learning got slightly better improvement results in listening comprehension and speaking skills – arguably the most challenging skills to develop in F2F classes. According to the author (Ibid.), the mutual mistake correction also helped students increasing awareness about their own language. Rather than only working Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) skills, tandem contributes to the development of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), which corresponds to the skills developed from social activities and everyday language. The contact with natives creates ideal conditions to achieve native-like conversational proficiency since it is very much context-embedded and always used in real-life situations that have real-world connections (HAKUTA; BUTLER; WITT, 2000).

To sum up this section, the bold advantage of blended and tandem learning models is the merge of online and F2F educational practices in order to arrange much better interactional networks at the local, regional and global levels. Students can be protagonists and team up in joint problem-solving activities, in which both share knowledge and responsibility for the task (DIAZ; NEAL; AMAYA-WILLIAMS, 1990). These practices may affect factors such as dropout, employability and interest level. The following case study (Chapter 3) won't offer teaching recipes; instead it will offer something akin to ideas, understandings and educational experiences that might be applicable in a variety of contexts.

4 An Experience with Blended & Tandem learning

As mentioned before, this case study describes an experience with B-learning from 2012 onwards, in a private Brazilian university located in São Paulo¹. It also examines a pilot project with tandem learning within one semester (2015-1) at the same university. At first as a teacher, later as the program coordinator, I taught and coordinated the discipline of English for the School of Business and Hospitality (Business Administration, Marketing, International Relations, International Trade, Hospitality, and Tourism majors).

Goals

In this study, it was my utmost intent to evaluate the learners' perception of the methodological triplet for EFL learning: face-to-face, blended and tandem learning. Furthermore, the program effectiveness was a major concern.

1 Due to identity protection, the university will be referred as UA. UDLA will be the reference for the partner institution in the tandem learning project.

Through the analysis of assessment and evaluation results, surveys, comments, and interactions of a UA students' cohort, it was possible to determine their (a) levels of interest, rejection and responsibility as autonomous learners and language learning partners; (b) skills using software applications for English learning; and (c) cultural and personality traces noticeable from face-to-face and distance interactions in the given context.

Theoretical Framework: Systemic-Functional Linguistics

With a view to analyze the Brazilian students' behavior in distance interactions, the functionalist theory of language named Systemic-Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) was applied. It's important to say that the SFL theory was able to provide the necessary tools to measure the levels of motivation of students engaged in different EFL experiences. Since Halliday's groundbreaking research in 1994, there has been a lot of work carried out in the area of FL (e.g. MARTIN, 2000; HALLIDAY, MATHIESSEN, 2004; EGGINS, 2004). The SFL conceives language to be inseparable from human (socially and culturally mediated), being a theory centered around the notion of language function and social context. Over and above, the language is characterized by its multifunctional nature and is seen as a system where each choice "acquires its meanings against the background of other choices that could have been made" (EGGINS, 2004, p. 3). According to Halliday (1994), the language constructs three types of simultaneous meanings, or metafunctions: Ideational (refers to information), Interpersonal (refers to the interaction between the interlocutors in communication) and textual (refers to the construction of the text).

Scholars holding SFL perspective suggest that this is the most appropriate body of research for examining the connection between the linguistic structure and social values (FOWLER, 1991; FAIRCLOUGH, 1992). Hence, the interactions of UA students involved in tandem learning were analysed in the light of the theory of Appraisal (MARTIN, 2000) – associated to SFL. In this paper, I shall briefly outline the tenets of the Appraisal theory, which was useful to understand how students behaved linguistically in learning interactions. By contextualizing students' propositions within the overall framework of Appraisal, it was expected to build a theoretical basis upon which to guide the evaluation of semantics as an extension of the Interpersonal metafunction. According to Martin and White (2003), attitude types define the specifics of appraisal being expressed: affect (personal emotional state), judgment (social or ethical appraisal of other's behaviour), and appreciation (evaluation of phenomena).

Program

The base of students who attended the program had a steady growth – except for 2013-2, when the discipline onset was shifted from the first to the second semester. School of Business and Hospitality topped 2294 students in 2015-1², as depicted in the Chart 1.

2 UA runs on a semester system, which splits the school year in halves (e.g. 2015-1 and 2015-2).

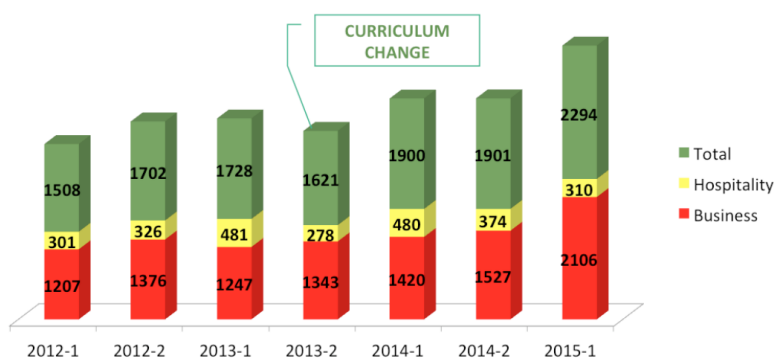


Chart 1: Number of Students Enrolled in the Program.

Although all the aforementioned majors set store by the in-curriculum discipline of English, the peculiarities of each area (e.g. graduate's demands, job market expectations, ever-changing syllabi) led to contrasting curricula:

- Business Administration, Marketing, International Relations and Hospitality - 4 semesters;
- Tourism - 2 semesters;
- International Trade – 8 semesters.

The total share of English (discipline) in the curricula was big on the whole. For example, in majors with four semesters of English – which bear the most part of the enrolled students – English took 15% (320 hours), or thereabouts, of the total study load (3000 hours). This proportionality is represented in the Chart 2.

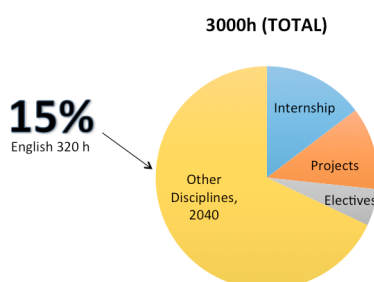


Chart 2: In-curriculum English Discipline in Four Semesters (hours).

Design

The program was scaffolded by four pillars:

- 1) EIL (English as International Language) – promote the Lingua Franca teaching mindset upon planning, teaching and materials. Focus on internationalization and branding.
- 2) ICT (Information Communication Technology) – use tools and technological approaches underscoring M-learning and LMS.
- 3) Flexible Methodologies – apply flexible methodologies in order to meet the

diversity of The School of Business and Hospitality, since it comprises multiple dynamic and ever-evolving contextual dimensions. Thus, teaching approaches aimed to attend different learning styles (e.g. visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, etc.) and nurture students' Esteem and Social Needs (c.f. Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation, 1943).

- 4) More study time – invest on ICT as a mean to afford more study time to students outside of the classroom.

Flexible Delivery of Instructions

Adopting the bold strategy of meeting the criteria of breadth, the methodological approaches sought to create an EFL flexible delivery of instructions (mediated and autonomous) with views to the development of higher-order thinking skills. Figure 1 represents how the adopted methodological approaches were complementary: face-to-face classes (mandatory), B-learning (optional/ meritocracy policy), and tandem learning (pilot project).

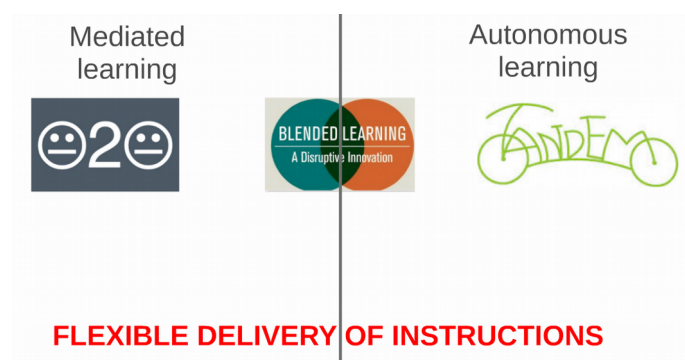


Figure 1: Flexible Delivery of Instructions.

Levelling

The levelling (or grouping) for F2F classes progressed in search of accreditation and quality ratings. The following steps were then taken: (1) as soon as students started out in the program as sophomores, they took a proficiency test to be placed (c.f. CEFR); (2) students were then divided into groups – max 30 students; (3) groups were optimized in *pools*³ from 2014-1 and so forth. Despite the effort to meet students' individual needs through placement tests, the levelling of classes faced a major crux on occasion of the detection of more levels within a group than the number of groups (classes) offered. The Chart 3 provides a sample of the students' entrance levels (proportion) in one of the university campuses.

3 *Pools* refer to groups of an average of 30 students in which there may be students of different majors who share similar levels of knowledge in English language. This division fostered the positive interrelationship among students, their culture, background and minor field of experience. Therefore, UA created pools of: (1) *Business*: Business Management, Marketing and International Relations; and (2) *Hospitality* – Hospitality and Tourism. International Trade students didn't study in *pools*.

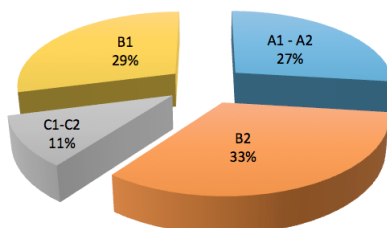


Chart 3: Entrance Levels Based on the Placement Test – Campus A 2014-2.

In the interest of addressing the needs of students assessed in very high or very low proficiency standards, as well as borderline students (few in numbers and unfeasible to be grouped), teachers made use of complementary activities and also challenged students to strive for. In this regard, the online component was crucial because it could respond to the exact needs of each student. The Results section will unfold the combination of F2F and online components and re-examine the issues.

B-Learning

The blended methodology adopted in the program was designed in the flex mode with substantial F2F support. The online classes accounted for 50% of the course total hours and took place on the online learning management system *CambridgeLMS*. This platform complements the book series *Touchstone* and *View Point* (Cambridge University Press). As the counterpart of F2F learning, teachers demanded online duties on LMS as they came along the syllabus.

As expected, B-learning allowed students to be actively involved in the process of meaning and knowledge construction. This internalization process is best known as appropriation (ALJAAFREH; LANTOLF, 1994), and it happens when an individual does not simply reproduce the mental activity of another individual, but rather transforms and changes the process itself, ultimately creating new cognitive abilities where none existed before (VYGOTSKY, 1981, p. 163). B-learning creates an ideal environment to undertake learning from the Object-regulation to the Other-regulation. In time, students finally take control over strategic mental actions and achieve Self-regulation – wherein B-learning seems to be unrivalled maximizing learning opportunities.

Tandem Learning

As previously mentioned, blended was complemented with tandem learning in which was a pilot project that took place in 2014-2. The idea came up after a mirror class project of Hospitality with students from UDLA. In the aftermath, five UA Brazilian students (B1-B2 levels) were put in contact with three UDLA native speakers of English students in situations of E-tandem (Portuguese-English). At the occasion, students used mobile apps to interact synchronically.

Granted that minimal outside interference in tandem learning is coveted, teachers only provided as-needed guidance and qualified support to students in case of miscommunication or inquiries into the content. Thus, students trod outside their comfort circles because they were not being hard-pressed to study (as trendy and usual); they were free to discuss about anything they wanted at any time. For their participation, they

got bonus points by sending pieces of interactions they felt comfortable in sharing with – exemplified in the Figure 2.



Figure 2: E-Tandem: Conversation Screenshot.

Tandems maximized the advantage of being under tutelage of a more competent peer, when the partner serves the learner such as a vicarious form of consciousness (surrogate) until such times as the learner is able to master his own action through his own consciousness and control. According to Bruner (1985, p. 24), “when the peer achieves conscious control over a new function or conceptual system, it is then that [s]he is able to use it as a tool. [...] the tutor in effect performs the critical function of ‘scaffolding’ the learning task to make it possible [...] to internalize external knowledge and convert it into a tool for conscious control”. Beyond that, the contact with natives provided context-embedded instruction, which is believed (c.f. GAY, 2000) to work as a culturally responsive pedagogy: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory.

Content: ESL and ESP

Blended and tandem learning are methodological approaches to be on a par with content in regard to language learning. For this reason, we have to allot a central role to content in the epistemic path of foreign language learning, in which the biggest dilemma rolled in is the course orientation into academic or vocational training. In other words, should we focus on language learning with a view to everyday life communication or its use in the job market? Any school administrator and teacher will readily admit that there is not an easy answer to the question. Lifelong experience dawned on me that the hybrid model is probably the best choice.

There is probably a certain level of confusion about the curriculum (p.ext. content) adopted in most of the universities. In fact, some authors believe that there are several myths about ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Some people describe ESP as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that can be specified. Others, however, are more precise, describing it as the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes (ANTHONY, 1997). Ramos (2005, p.116) identifies as a major problem the fact that the “ESP has become synonymous with reading courses and, on the other hand, all the reading-orientated courses are viewed as ESP ones”. One more issue developed by Ramos (Ibid.) is that “you can only teach ESP after the student mastered the ‘basic English’”. The author is dead set against this reasoning because, once in the real world, the basics for a

professional may or may not be to another.

Often, teachers are at a loss. Supporting evidence suggests that teachers might dampen the possibilities of students in professional life by excluding the lower level ones or by targeting specific skills. Based on these notions, we split up the content at UA: (a) more ESP in F2F classes, because teachers had the chance to assess language level, check on students' interests, prepare up-to-date activities and gather relevant material to meaningful learning aligned with professional training; (b) more EFL in online classes (LMS), because students could be respected in their rhythm (up-tempo or slow-paced), and could carry out the activities as often as they wanted to. Of course, teachers intervened in F2F classes (synchronously) either over ESP or EFL content. Actually, the flex blended learning model has the teacher as a difference-maker. He/she is the one in charge of planning and adjusting in response to ever-changing needs and demands. Below, Figure 3 illustrates how ESP and EFL contents were ideally balanced according to levels' needs.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

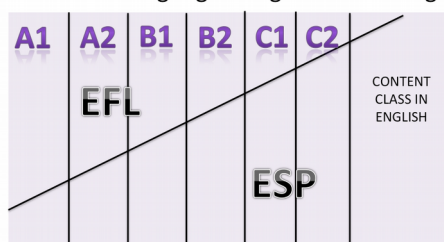


Figure 3: CLIL: EFL and ESP for levels (CEFR).

Faculty

Although a well-rounded merge of EFL and ESP framed by an eclectic technological approach was the blueprint of the program, the teacher's role was not diminished, in the sense of his/her capability to diagnose, ponder and act towards students' needs. Wertsch (1984, p. 13) points out that, rather than simply framing the role of the teacher as modelling, the teacher initially creates a level of "intersubjectivity".

As we mulled over the intersubjectivity and progressed through the interconnectedness of a multilayered program, it has become clear that the path to the quality education had to include highly qualified teachers with plural academic background, so they could interact with students beyond the communicative essence of the language. Consequently, the faculty (in 2015-1) counted with the participation of eight English teachers with specialization, Master's or Ph.D. degrees from the fields of Education, Linguistics, Hospitality, Gastronomy, and Business.

Assessment and evaluation

The online component had a deep impact on the evaluation system. In addition to the rule-bound (F2F) assessment UA teachers had to perform, the *CambridgeLMS* offered the following advantages for online assessment:

- (1) Assertiveness;
- (2) Continuity;
- (3) Reduction of teachers' activities;
- (4) Similarity with job market assessment standards.

The gradebook software of the platform could be set to assign marks based on performance. It also could benchmark students in all the four skills: reading, writing, speaking (with limitations), and listening. Moreover, teachers had blogs, forums, wikis and voice tools at their disposal.

With respect to the program evaluation, two samples of students who had reached the second and fourth semesters in the program – halfway and final points – were tested by the *Cambridge Proficiency Exam* in 2013-1. English II students took the Test Level-2 (CEFR Level), and English IV students did the Test Level-4 (CEFR Level). Because the test was not mandatory, a total of 208 students participated: 74 of Level-2 and 134 of Level-4. Attached to the test, two questionnaires asked students about: socioeconomic status (SES), opinions (program/teachers/LMS), and self-evaluation upon learning progress.

Next, I present valuable results to bear out further discussion over the established goals.

5 Results

About the levels of interest, rejection and responsibility

The students' satisfaction rate with the program was measured by anonymous semi-annual surveys carried out by teachers in the classroom. The surveys happened from 2012-2 to 2014-1 and the results were very promising (Chart 4).

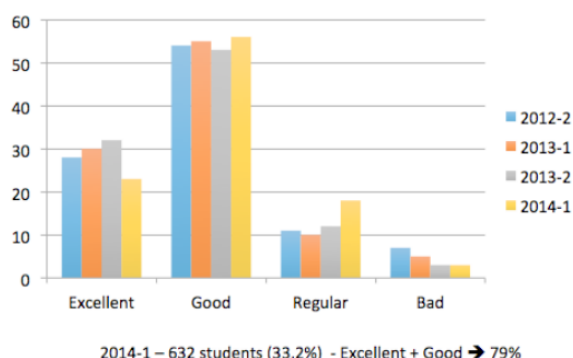


Chart 4: Students' Satisfaction (Percentage).

The high approval ratings were also due to the straightforward need for English language into branching out world citizenship. The importance of EFL foremost weighs on the concept of *Lingua Franca*, and a few questions in the survey were devoted exclusively to completing this picture. For example, Table 1 reveals students strongly relying on English to work (question 12), to communicate globally (question 15), and as personal achievement (question 18).

Table 1: Importance of English (survey).

		I strongly disagree → I strongly agree				
		1	2	3	4	5
12	I want to learn English because I will need it for my job.	2.0%	5.9%	10.8%	14.2%	67.2%
15	I want to learn English because it makes travelling to other countries easier.	1.5%	6.9%	11.3%	20.7%	59.6%
18	Doing well in English is important to me.	1.0%	1.0%	6.9%	22.1%	69.1%

Naturally, a good evaluation of the program is deeply connected to the students' perception of learning and the effectiveness of learning. Therefore, results should be read in perspective because they unfold complex connections and the intertwining mesh of learning and background for UA undergraduate students. The Charts 5 and 6 below will help to understand this melting pot.

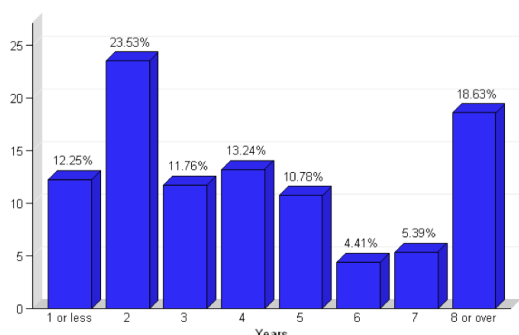


Chart 5: Age of Students (cohort).

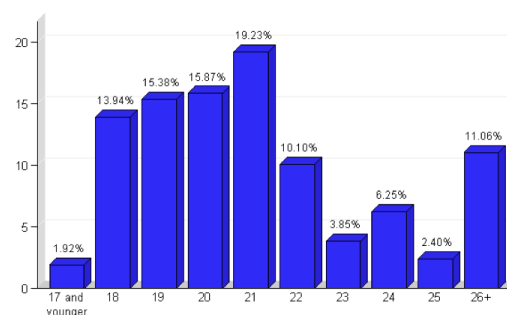


Chart 6: Time Spent Studying English By Students (cohort).

The proficiency test surveys inform that, in terms of age, students are approximated (nearly 75% in the range from 18 to 22 y.o.), albeit the margin above 26 is worthy of consideration. On the contrary, the time spent studying English by students is by far variable (e.g. 25.53% [two-year] concurrently with 18.63% [eight-year] learning experience). In Test Level-2, nearly 90% of the sample was at level A2 or below. Among students who took Test Level-4, almost 95% were within CEFR levels A2-B2. From the results and SES analysis, a few steps have been taken to redesign and improve the program. For example and prominently, the redefinition of a minimum Exit-level (B1) and the setup of a Competence-Oriented Teacher Training Program.

About students' savviness (tech tools)

In general, students proved to be tech savvy. They could use smartphones and go through web-based activities without a hitch. Following the Web 2.0 trend, there is an evident emphasis on online environments to study using user-generated content, usability, and interoperability. Though, students largely criticized the platform *CambridgeLMS*. Wording is based upon that LMS is time-consuming, out-of-context and disconnected from

Social Media. Further research has to be done to underlie such results.

About cultural and personality traces of Brazilian students (cohort) as learning partners

The interactions of students involved in the tandem project were analyzed in the scope of the Systemic-Functional Linguistics. Again, this paper does not have the necessary depth for that readership. Yet, there are two interesting outcomes from the appraisal analysis I would like to share:

1 – Peers were friendly and supportive. Both groups used a lot of positive appraisals in conversations for general descriptions (life, people, places). On the contrary, they used a high number of negative appraisals to describe themselves. We may find students swaying between these two extremes simply because they are displaying the characteristics of cultural adjustment along with error-prone and self-deprecating behavior at the earlier stages of learning. The following transcript is a perfect example of positive and negative appraisals (underlined) operating in the best interest of interpersonal communication.

M: He was very cute/ he was painfully cute. He was great. But I don't have a dog anymore, but I have...I walk my neighbors' dog. (AUDIO)

L: Oh right. I have Pipoca, it's a Shin Tzu...I don't know if it's wrote like this.

M: U mean "written". (SMILES)

L: OMG I feel ashamed making mistakes (SAD FACE EMOTICON)

M: C'mon. You're doing great. (SMILES)

2 – Engagement is another important aspect that frames cultural and personality traces. Analysis made evident that foreign students (native) turned out to get the upper hand in the turn-taking dispute. Brazilians seemed daunted by the Lingua Franca dominance.

Complementing the appraisal analysis, a summary of students' comments affords a glimpse on the benefits of tandem learning. The advantages outweigh the disadvantages:

- Tandem is good in theory, but complicated in practice because it is necessary a certain affinity level among partners. Countless arrays of the unspoken rules governing relationships may not be suitable in some tandems.

- Tandem has influenced students' attitudes towards the foreign language and the peer culture.

- Both groups expressed eagerness to explore more web-based language-learning activities on their own.

- Foreigners reported pleased with Brazilians' politeness and consideration.

Issues & Challenges

This case study presented a successful EFL program, which is reflected on promising results from Cambridge Proficiency Test and the students' appreciation for the program. More importantly, results draw connections to the effectiveness of the methodologies adopted. It is my intent, otherwise, to raise reader's awareness about some

issues that we had to overcome, as well as challenges on the horizon. Next, I pinpoint a few problems and thought-out primary solutions.

- Insufficient groups: there were times when students were placed wrongly because of the insufficient number of groups (i.e. levels). Even with the pools, there were three levels (CEFR) at maximum for each group. Upon facing this situation, teachers tried to provide extra activities to students, which turned out to be insufficient. UA headquarters outlined restructuring actions down the road, such as larger pools and syllabus flexibility. I tend to think that long-term measures are more effective if combined with short-term ones. A large-scale tandem project could immediately impact on students' improvement, specifically of the borderline and advanced ones. It's known that language skills are not overtly taught in tandem learning, but nevertheless inherently known by native English speakers.
- Paucity of ESP material: despite the good reviews of the course, many students found fault with teachers focusing on English Language Skills rather than English for Specific Purposes. In fact, for the most part, participants failed thinking the plan through (section "Content: ESL and ESP" deals with the matter, wherein the ESP/EFL balancing is detailed). Class observations determined that the teachers were on the ropes developing ESP activities; and the flaws were many: (1) ready-made material is usually too broad and rejected by students who claim for specifics; (2) ready-made ESP material for A1-B1 students is rare, since some authors believe they're not level-appropriate; (3) context-embedded material ought to be updated monthly, weekly, even daily at the university level; and (4) four to eight semesters of English discipline and different teachers led to repeated activities/texts regularly. At the time, teachers found the short-term solution of creating shared folders in *clouds* for an ESP database divided into levels (A1 to C2) and majors. Subsequently, there was little or no chance of replicated activities and we could diversify styles. Rather, feeding the database proved to be a slow, randomly and time-consuming process.
- Participation in the LMS: Not all the students were enrolled on the *CambridgeLMS* platform, which was a troublesome problem for the B-learning favorable outcome (Chart 7).

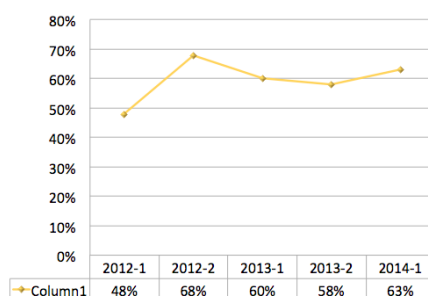


Chart 7: Average of Students Who Accessed the Cambridge Platform (%).

Participation on the platform was not but indispensable. The very real consequence of this situation (about 60% of participation) is that it put in jeopardy the effectiveness of the blended approach. After adopted, UA made LMS duties not

mandatory. Early on, a bonus policy, albeit very helpful and attractive, did not reach out the students. Then, UA directors started studying a way to make the participation mandatory. Although I reckon on the importance of LMS, the amount of previous research can't prove we should constrain students rather than motivate them. Personally, I still stand for meritocracy policies because there's an underlying meaning not readily noticeable that mandatory commitment may affect the willingness and enthusiasm of students, which is ultimately crucial to learn whichever additional language.

6 Concluding Remarks

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) seems to be on the threshold of major changes in distance education. At the very beginning, ICT was essentially used to retool long-standing educational processes – late 70s to early 80s – then, on a world-scale shift, it has underpinned and reshaped several educational approaches by enhancing distance learning models that include blended and tandem methodological approaches. While blended combines F2F and distance education (mostly web-based), tandem focuses on partnerships for language learning, particularly in synchronous interactions. Both methods evolve hand in hand with steady technological advances. The benefits of such models propel individualized and diverse needs of students who thrive in multimodal and multicultural educational routines.

Within a technological framework of language learning, the more you offer ways of learning, the better you achieve the success that is by custom expected to students. In this sense, mental activity is unique and, however much a tech-friendly online-adaptive generation rises up, it's wise to admit that dispossessing students from the human element is not a way to revolutionize or modernize education. A flexible delivery of instructions optimizes language education because (c.f. BRUNER, 1985, p. 32) “there is no way, none, in which the human being could possibly master that world without the aid and assistance of others for in fact that world is others”.

This case study attempted to unpack the nexus of an EFL program (to undergraduate Brazilian students) of a technological approach that primed for synchronous and asynchronous interactions in mediated and autonomous learning contexts. In order to bring off successful results, face-to-face classes + blended learning + tandem Learning were woven together into a strong and effective foreign language program. The following outcomes are noteworthy:

- Students had maximized opportunities for EFL learning (in hours).
- Students got promising proficiency results.
- Application of social media and mobiles for language learning may be not the ideal for EFL. However, it proved to be extremely successful in tandem learning for synchronous interactions. Some students felt uncomfortable with the language management system adopted.
- In tandem learning, students felt empowered to “teach” their own language. It shifts away from an error-centered education and instead emphasizes communication for the learning process.
- Students subjected to blended + tandem methodologies wound up becoming more

participative in F2F classes.

In conclusion, this case study showed how effective can be the combination of blended and tandem learning models in order to merge ESP and EFL, BICS and CALP, mediated and autonomous learning, and synchronous and asynchronous interaction. More than that, the prerogative to respect diversity is the key to a strong EFL program, particularly for higher education.

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