

## **Blended learning model to develop professional communicative competence in a Business English Course for graduate students of non-linguistic universities**

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*The paper describes the concept of blended learning and its applicability to teaching Business English to graduate students of non-linguistic universities. The benefits and challenges of blended courses have been explored. Open access and closed technologies have been reviewed and compared.*

**Keywords:** *blended classroom, Web 2.0, open access technology, institutionally supported LMS; communicative competence.*

**Introduction.** Today, most universities in Russia are faced with a challenge of incorporating communication and information technologies in teaching a variety of courses. This is primarily due to the rapid development of the Internet and mobile applications, which have become a part of our everyday life. The emergence of new ways of communication demands rethinking of educational experience from a new perspective, which can be either fully online or blended. This, of course, does not deny traditional face-to-face method of teaching, which has stood the test of ages and has lots of advantages. However, adding online component can bring lots of benefits to both teachers and students. The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of blended learning and its applicability to teaching Business English in non-linguistic universities.

**Blended learning approach and its challenges.** The concept of blended learning is different from fully online courses, which have been used in higher education institutions for more than a decade. *Blended learning* is defined as “the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies” [1: 148]. Although the idea sounds quite simple, there are still lots of challenges teachers and lecturers have to cope with when it comes to combining traditional and online approaches. The main problems include the design, facilitation, direction, and assessment of blended learning in contemporary higher education.

Designing a blended learning class is a challenging and complicated task, especially for foreign language instructors. A teacher must be familiar with the technology and develop useful planning strategies. This includes selecting and dividing the content so that it suits best either face-to-face or online environments. Lack of experience in online course design

often results in duplicating the materials teachers use in their traditional classes. Making the right decision requires certain experience of both teaching and studying online. The best thing a teacher can do is to get enrolled in an online course and see how it works. Another problem is related to computer literacy, which is still an issue for many lecturers who are reluctant to incorporate technology into their teaching practices. This is caused by fear of technology, on the one hand, and lack of time to master the necessary skills required for online course design, on the other. However, selecting appropriate development strategies seems to be impossible without clear understanding of available technologies.

**Open and closed technologies for blended learning.** Today, most universities in Russia have learning management systems (LMS), which provide teachers with an array of useful tools to be used both in fully online and blended classes. Institutionally supported LMS can be supplemented by Web 2.0 technologies widely available in the Net. When making a decision about the choice of technology, an instructor has to explore the possibilities of different tools and choose the one which best meets the learners' needs.

Institutionally supported LMS are closed technologies (*Moodle, Blackboard, etc.*) as they limit access to authorized users who are members of this institution. This has both advantages and disadvantages for instructors and learners. Being secure, private, centralized and controlled environment, LMS might have certain limitations which prevent teachers from using the materials they think will help students to achieve their learning outcomes. Apart from this they require some training, which can be quite complicated and time-consuming.

Open access technologies (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc.) often referred as social media are free and familiar to both teachers and students since they are widely used for communication. However, they are not secure and teachers have to solve the issue of privacy on their own. Some students might refuse to use this or that open technology for certain reasons.

**Developing communicative competence in Business English classes through blended learning.** Language acquisition is impossible without developing communicative competence of learners as it is "the underlying system of knowledge and skill required for communication" [2: 5]. Communicative approach, which replaced traditional grammar-based approach of the past, is learner-centered, cooperative (collaborative), interactive, integrated, content-centered and task-based. In Russia, communicative teaching started about two decades ago and since that time teachers have tailored their courses in such a way as to facilitate and encourage interaction in ESL classes. However, the set goals are not necessarily achieved. The problem is that learners' communicative use of English outside the classroom is bound to be limited, and as a result,

their success in acquiring communicative competence in the target language is not easily obtained.

Blended learning can help to solve this problem in many ways. Firstly, it enables learners to work away from the classroom and increase substantially the amount of time they study English, which is especially relevant to non-linguistic university students. Some of the activities, like listening and writing can be done online in self-access mode. Peer-review and other similar student-to-student activities increase independent work and raise motivation for learning. Secondly, the Internet provides lots of opportunities for creating learning communities via social networks. Students' behavior in a traditional classroom can be completely different from that online and teachers can take advantage of this by encouraging discussions in forums and blogs. Adding a comment to a thread set up by either a teacher or student can be a mandatory course requirement or an optional one. However, some students might find it off-putting if they are forced to do activities online, so a teacher must be very sensitive to learners' needs and expectations. Thirdly, blended approach is ideal for learner-paced system, as it enables each student to follow optimum learning path and covers for individual differences of learners. They can practice as much as they need to develop the necessary skills. Fourthly, there is a very good opportunity for extensive input of materials, which is facilitated through face-to-face contact in the traditional classroom, where teachers can provide the necessary support and assistance to learners who have some troubles with acquisitions of the material. And finally, blended learning approach helps to develop skills in professional communication, which requires extensive use of technology (presentations, video-conferencing, e-mail, etc.). Incorporating technology in teaching Business English is a good way to improve students' IT literacy, on the one hand, and make them more prepared for efficient communication in business environment through task-based activities.

**Conclusion.** A successful combination of traditional and online teaching can be quite beneficial for both students and teachers provided the instructor applies the right strategies to course design and meets the learners needs and expectations.

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# Интегративная модель формирования иноязычной профессиональной компетенции в рамках курса «Деловой иностранный язык» для магистрантов неязыкового вуза

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*Работа посвящена изучению возможностей интегративной модели обучения и ее применимости к преподаванию делового английского языка магистрантам неязыковых вузов. Рассмотрены преимущества и обозначены проблемы, связанные с разработкой курсов, сочетающих традиционные и дистанционные формы обучения. Проанализированы возможности виртуальных информационно-образовательных систем и технологий открытого доступа для решения образовательных задач.*

**Ключевые слова:** смешанное обучение, Web 2.0, технологии открытого доступа, информационно-образовательная среда учебного заведения, коммуникативная компетенция.

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