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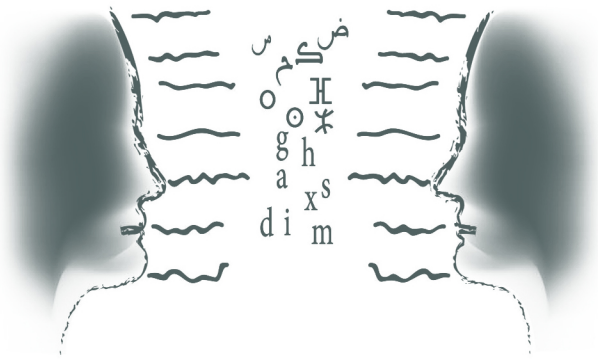

Promoting a Culture of Innovativeness in English Studies in Moroccan Higher Education

Promouvoir l'esprit d'innovation dans les études anglaises à l'université marocaine

Préparé par / Edited by
Reddad Erguig

JL & LJ
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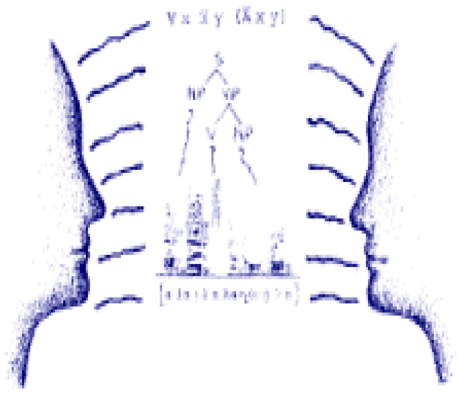

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Moha Ennaji
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E-mail: mennaji2002@yahoo.fr
Fax: +212 (0) 5 35 61 09 10
Website: http://www.lang-ling.on.ma

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Table of Contents

Introduction[·]

Reddad Erguig[·]

Since the beginning of the new reform in Higher Education in 2003 in Morocco, most educational debates have centred on offering evaluations of the implementation of the Reform. Several debates focused on identifying the challenges that hinder an effective implementation of such a reform, suggesting practical recommendations that could enhance the quality of teaching and learning in Morocco. Although they attempted to highlight future prospects and opportunities, such debates were much too concerned with the challenges and obstacles that hinder the effective teaching of English.

This special issue is a contribution to the debate revolving around the design and implementation of an effective system of higher education with special reference to English Studies. One of the strengths of the present issue of *Languages and Linguistics* is that it includes scholarly research articles that provide academically rigorous discussions. Another strength of this issue is that each one of the articles reports an innovative teaching experience with each one offering insights that can inform ELT teaching instruction and assessment practices. As a matter of fact, the contributors to this volume touch upon issues that challenge the effective teaching of English, yet they highlight the creative and innovative teaching and assessment experiences that challenge barriers and constraints and boost collaboration among teachers to better inform teachers' instruction and students' learning. The articles in this volume are of interest to scholars and professionals in the area of English language teaching. They are also of interest to teacher-trainees and to students who plan a career in ELT in Higher Education.

[·] *Langues et Linguistique* 38 (2016), pp. i-iv.

I would like to thank all the people who contributed to the completion of this issue. Special thanks go to the contributors. I would also like to thank the general editors for the opportunity to put the articles together in this special issue. A word of thanks goes to the anonymous reviewers who kindly accepted to review the articles and provide comments and suggestions to the authors. Special thanks go to the members of the Applied Language and Culture Studies Research Laboratory (ALCS) for their dedication and professionalism during the organisation of the First National Conference, during which these papers were first presented. Special thanks are also due to Said Jebbar and Abdelkrim El Amari for their help with the translation of the introduction into Arabic and French.

In the first article, Daouia Laaboudi and Reddad Erguig discuss an experience of blending in two language courses. They evaluate English-major students' engagement in, experience of and attitudes to blending and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of this pedagogical tool used to promote learning experience. Using a mixed-methods design and Kirkpatrick's (1994) Four-Level Training Evaluation Model, they explore students' appraisal of the two blended courses and the ways these courses promote their learning. The results they obtained indicate that students differ in the extent to which they engaged in blended courses and the degree to which they benefited from the learning opportunities they offered them. Nevertheless, blending was unquestionably an added value that contributed to actively engaging students in their own learning and to their construction of their own knowledge. The authors argue for the need to allocate sufficient funding to facilitate students' access to technology and to organise orientation sessions to train them in how they can make the best of blending. They also emphasise the need to offer teachers professional development and train them in using technology and designing instructional software.

In the second article, Hicham Zyad contributes to research on writing by investigating the short-term effects of a blended writing course on semester-one students' writing quality as assessed by holistic ratings and objectives measures of complexity and accuracy. The author used a Moodle platform to provide the students with supplementary materials along with face-to-face work in the classroom and to enable students to both post their assignments in group blogs and exchange feedback. The results indicate that the students' compositions improved as a function of the effects of the blended writing course. However, the improvement affected mechanics, grammar and vocabulary but not content and organisation. The blended collaborative writing program affected accuracy more than complexity largely due to the fact that the students' online collaborative interactions were focused on micro-level issues of writing such as mechanics, grammar and vocabulary. The author then suggests that writing courses should not be turned into grammar courses and that more efforts should instead be invested to improve students' skills in content and organisation as well as their ability to produce adjoining clauses through practice and exposure to models written by expert writers. He also stresses the need to increase their use of all sorts of social networking technologies to extend the learning experience outside class time.

Hassan Ait Bouzid's article examines the ways in which textbook evaluation, a practice commonly used in K-12 education, can boost the quality of university course books. He investigates the ways in which the design of two course books used to teach the "Study Skills" course are innovative with regard to the selection and presentation of the course content as well as the assessment of the learning outcomes. Using a mixed-methods approach consisting of content analysis and structured interviews, the author discusses the similarities and differences as well as the strengths and weaknesses in the two course books and shows that the

two course books present quasi-similar content, but they differ in the teaching approach. The author stresses the innovative aspects in the two course books, namely the involvement of the students in the design of its content and the incorporation of the latest ICT tools in the presentation of the course content.

The fourth article, by Bouchaib Benzehaf, is based on the claim that innovations based on ICT in areas such as curricula and learning objectives require similar innovations in assessment practices. The article is based on a case study of first year students' writing products in which students were provided with instant, personalized, needs-based and descriptive feedback on the Internet as well as an analysis of students' attitudes vis-à-vis the cyber-coaching model. The author shows that students have positive attitudes towards cyber-coaching and that their products improved in terms of overall writing performance and language use. He then stresses the importance of using cyber-coaching model as a form of online formative assessment and argues for the need to incorporate it in Moroccan higher education.

Karim Bensoukas's article is concerned with the implementation of Flipped Learning as an innovative constructivist, learner-based pedagogy that uses video lectures to deliver direct content instruction and class time for one-on-one education in the teaching of "Introductory Phonetics". After briefly describing the phonetics course content and reviewing Flipped Learning and the relevant aspects of the digital learning resources developed, the author describes the flipped phonetics project he undertook and offers an evaluation thereof. The results he obtained through an examination of students' assessment of the implementation of Flipped Learning indicate that it was a relative success, which implies the need for the extension of Flipped Learning to other aspect of linguistics and a more systematic, in-depth study in the future.

Mohamed Yeou's article reports the results of a quasi-experimental study on the impact of a blended learning approach on students' performance outcomes in a "Research Methods" course at a Moroccan university. Comparing the final course grade of an experimental group of students using a Moodle LMS-supported course to access all the instruction materials and those of a control group who use exclusively face-to-face communication in class, the author notes that the experimental group had slightly higher but not statistically significant means, which might rather be accounted for by GPA. The analysis of students' log data for the experimental group revealed that only the number of online sessions and the GPA were significantly associated with final student grade. The author then concludes that blended learning is as useful and effective as face-to-face learning.

The final article, by Ikbal Zeddari', is concerned with the end-of-studies project at the English department, Mohammed V University in Rabat. Based on an

information-seeking behaviour survey with undergraduate students, the author examines students' conceptions of and the difficulties they face in the research process. The results he obtained indicate that students approach the research task constructively and evaluate their experiences positively. The students reported gains and improvements in conceptual knowledge, linguistic proficiency, and technical skills as well as their academic self-appraisals and affective traits. However, they faced several obstacles consisting in information-related problems, negative internal factors, and variable skill level in research. The author eventually argues for the need to integrate research skills across the curriculum.

In conclusion, the different articles in this issue offer scholarly discussions of tested teaching practices that may hopefully be borrowed and adapted in different educational settings and classroom experiences. Thus, this issue is a platform designed to foster a sense of collegiality among university teachers. Alternative pathways towards the development of such collegiality and the promotion of quality teaching in Higher Education will hopefully be the focus of future research.

Introduction

Reddad Erguig

Depuis l'application de la nouvelle réforme dans l'enseignement supérieur en 2003, les débats se sont focalisés sur des évaluations de son implémentation. De nombreux débats ont identifié les défis et difficultés qui entravent la mise en œuvre de la reforme de manière efficace et effective. Des recommandations pratiques en vue d'améliorer la qualité de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage au Maroc ont été proposées. Bien que ces débats ont mis en relief les perspectives et les opportunités, ils étaient plus focalisés sur les défis et obstacles entravant l'enseignement de la langue anglaise.

Ce numéro spécial est une contribution à ce débat qui tourne autour de la conception et l'implémentation d'un système de l'enseignement supérieur effectif avec un intérêt particulier aux études anglaises.

L'un des points forts de ce numéro spécial est qu'il présente des articles scientifiques abordant des questions de l'enseignement avec une grande rigueur académique. Chaque article offre, avec discernement et sagacité, une expérience innovatrice portant sur les instructions et les évaluations des pratiques de l'enseignement. Les différentes contributions traitent des sujets relatifs à l'enseignement effectif de la langue anglaise et mettent en relief les expériences de l'enseignement et d'évaluations créatrices et innovatrices qui aident à surmonter les barrières et les contraintes, mais qui favorisent aussi les collaborations entre enseignants dans la perspective d'améliorer l'enseignement et l'apprentissage. Ce volume, par conséquent, est d'une aide inestimable pour les chercheurs et les professionnels de l'enseignement de la langue anglaise. Il est aussi très utile pour les professeurs stagiaires ainsi que pour les étudiants qui envisagent une carrière dans l'enseignement de la langue anglaise.

Dans le premier article, Daouia LAABOUDI et Reddad ERGUIG exposent une expérience de l'enseignement mixte (Blending) dans deux cours de langue. Ils évaluent l'engagement et l'attitude des étudiants vis-à-vis du « Blending ». Ils analysent les points forts et les points faibles de cette approche pédagogique qui cible l'amélioration de l'apprentissage. Usitant d'une méthode mixte et du modèle de Kirkpatrick (1994), ils explorent l'appréciation des étudiants par rapport aux deux cours mixtes (Blended) et la manière par laquelle ces cours favorisent et promeuvent l'apprentissage. Les résultats obtenus montrent que les étudiants s'engagent et également profitent à des degrés différents des opportunités d'apprentissage offertes à eux. Ces cours mixtes étaient incontestablement d'une grande valeur ajoutée car ils incitaient les étudiants non seulement à s'engager activement dans leurs propres

apprentissages mais aussi à la construction et au développement de leurs savoirs. Les auteurs défendent l'idée selon laquelle il faut allouer plus de moyens afin de permettre aux étudiants l'accès aux nouvelles technologies, et d'organiser des sessions d'orientation en vue de leur apprendre comment exploiter le « Blending » à bon escient. Les auteurs soulignent également la nécessité de proposer un plan de carrière aux enseignants, de les former à utiliser les nouvelles technologies et à élaborer des logiciels d'apprentissage.

Dans le deuxième article, Hicham ZYAD explore les effets de l'expression écrite mixte (blended writing) à court terme sur la qualité des écrits des étudiants du semestre 1 se basant sur une approche globale de notation. L'auteur a utilisé une plate-forme d'apprentissage en ligne pour fournir aux étudiants les sujets supplémentaires en parallèle avec l'apprentissage direct en classe afin de leur permettre de publier leurs devoirs dans des blogs et échanger les feedbacks. Les résultats montrent que les étudiants ont développé leurs capacités de rédaction grâce au « Blended writing ». Néanmoins, cette amélioration a concerné les mécaniques de l'écriture, la grammaire et le vocabulaire aux dépens du contenu et de l'organisation. Le programme de l'écriture (ou de rédaction) collaborative mixte a affecté plus l'exactitude et la justesse que la complexité; et pour cause, les échanges collaboratifs entre les étudiants, sur le net, se sont limités aux petits problèmes de l'expression écrite, tels les mécaniques, la grammaire et le vocabulaire. L'auteur propose que les cours de l'expression écrite ne tournent pas à des cours de grammaire. Des efforts doivent être déployés pour améliorer la ou les capacités des étudiants à développer le contenu, à produire des phrases et les organiser par le biais de beaucoup d'exercices ; et pourquoi ne pas familiariser les étudiants avec des modèles écrits par des experts. L'auteur souligne le besoin d'utiliser les réseaux sociaux afin d'élargir l'apprentissage hors classe pour les étudiants.

Hassan Ait BOUZID examine comment l'évaluation des programmes scolaires, une pratique répandue dans l'enseignement, peut “booster” et améliorer la qualité des programmes à l'université. Il explore à quel point deux programmes utilisés dans l'enseignement du module “Study Skills” sont innovateurs dans leurs sélections et présentations des contenus ainsi que dans l'évaluation des apprentissages. Usitant d'une approche mixte reposant sur l'analyse du contenu et des entretiens, l'auteur étudie les similitudes et les différences ainsi que les points forts et les points faibles dans les deux programmes. Il démontre que les deux programmes académiques présentent quasiment le même contenu avec une différence dans l'approche de l'enseignement. L'auteur met l'accent sur les aspects innovateurs dans les deux programmes notamment ceux qui portent sur l'implication des étudiants dans la conception du contenu du programme scolaire et l'intégration des nouvelles technologies dans la présentation du contenu des cours.

Le quatrième article, par son auteur Bouchaib BENZEHAF, est fondé sur le postulat suivant : les innovations basées sur les nouvelles technologies dans l'élaboration des programmes d'études et des objectifs d'apprentissage nécessitent des innovations similaires dans les pratiques d'évaluation. L'article repose sur une étude de cas concernant la production écrite des étudiants de première année qui ont bénéficié de feedback instantané et personnalisé via l'internet; ainsi qu'une analyse portant sur les attitudes des étudiants vis-à-vis du modèle du Cyber-coaching. L'autre démontre que les étudiants ont développé des attitudes positives envers le Cyber-coaching et que leurs productions se sont améliorées en terme de performance écrite et d'usage de la langue. L'auteur souligne l'importance du recours au modèle de Cyber-coaching comme forme d'évaluation formative en ligne et soutient l'idée d'intégrer le Cyber-coaching dans l'enseignement supérieur marocain à tous les niveaux.

L'article de Karim BENSOUKAS s'intéresse à l'implémentation de l'apprentissage renversé en tant qu'approche constructiviste innovatrice centrée sur l'apprenant. L'approche repose sur l'utilisation de cours sous forme de vidéos, comme support, offrant des instructions de contenu direct avec une durée de cours allouée similaire à celle réservée à l'enseignement individuel du module « Introduction à la phonétique ». Après un bref descriptif du contenu du cours sur la phonétique et un passage en revue de l'apprentissage renversé et des aspects pertinents des ressources élaborées de l'apprentissage numérique, l'auteur relate son projet de phonétique renversé qu'il a entrepris et présente une évaluation de ce projet. Les résultats obtenus, après examen des évaluations fournies pas les étudiants sur la mise en œuvre de l'apprentissage renversé, montre que l'expérience était d'un succès relatif; ce qui implique son extension à d'autres aspects du domaine linguistique en vue d'une étude systématique et approfondie dans le futur.

Mohamed YEOU expose les résultats d'une étude expérimentale sur l'impact de l'apprentissage mixte sur les performances des étudiants dans un cours de « Research Methodology» dans une université marocaine. Comparant les notes finales obtenues par un groupe d'étudiants qui a utilisé la plateforme Moodle LMS pour accéder aux matériels pédagogiques et les notes d'un autre groupe qui a bénéficié exclusivement d'une communication directe enseignant-étudiants en classe, l'auteur remarque que le groupe échantillon a obtenu des notes légèrement supérieures insuffisamment signifiantes, d'un point de vue statistique, pour être expliquées par la moyenne pondérée cumulative (Grade Point Average). L'analyse des données de connexions du groupe expérimental montre que seules les sessions ouvertes en ligne et la moyenne pondérée cumulative ont été associées de manière significative avec la note finale obtenue par les étudiants. Par conséquent, l'auteur conclut que l'apprentissage mixte est utile et effectif au même titre que l'apprentissage direct en classe. Il suggère que les composantes d'un cours dans un apprentissage mixte soient élaborées de manière à offrir de nouveaux matériels

pédagogiques de façon hebdomadaire au lieu de tout donner en bloc dès le début de la formation.

Le dernier article, par Ikbal ZEDDARI, s'intéresse aux projets de fin d'études des étudiants du département d'anglais de l'Université Mohammed V de Rabat. L'étude porte sur l'attitude des étudiants vis-à-vis de la recherche de l'information. L'auteur examine comment les étudiants conçoivent faire de la recherche et les difficultés rencontrées lors du processus de recherche. Les résultats obtenus montrent que les étudiants abordent le travail de recherche de manière constructive et évaluent positivement leurs expériences. Les étudiants notent des améliorations aussi bien en terme de savoir conceptuel, de compétences linguistique et techniques que d'auto-évaluation académique. Néanmoins, les étudiants ont rencontré des problèmes d'ordre informationnel, de facteurs (de motivation personnelle) négatifs et aussi des variations de compétences en matière de recherche. L'auteur défend l'idée d'introduire "les compétences de recherches" durant toute la période de la formation.

Pour conclure, nous espérons que les différents articles de ce volume offrent et suscitent des débats scientifiques sur ces approches de l'enseignement qui ont fait leurs preuves. Les approches peuvent être adaptées à d'autres environnements éducatifs, voire à d'autres expériences. Ce numéro spécial de la revue *Langues et Linguistique* peut être considéré comme une plate-forme dont l'objectif est de développer la coopération et la collégialité entre les enseignants. Nous espérons que d'autres pistes relatives au développement de telle collégialité et l'amélioration de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur feront l'objet de recherches dans l'avenir.

. *Langues et Linguistique* 38 (2016), pp. v-viii

Blending Language Courses: An Added Value

DAOUIA LAABOUDI and REDDAD ERGUIG [·]

Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss an experience of using blending as a pedagogical tool to enhance our teaching as well as our English-major students' learning experience. Within the perspective of this pedagogical mix, we implemented blending in the teaching of two undergraduate language courses: "Oral Communication" and "Study Skills" in Fall, 2014. This article is based on the findings of previous research which stressed the important role of blending not only in informing teaching instruction but also in promoting students' language skills (Guangying, 2014; Yang, 2011), enhancing their academic achievement (Kazua & Demirkol, 2014; Means, Toyama, Murphy & Baki, 2013), promoting teacher and student initiative and enhancing learner autonomy (Guangyinga, 2014). More specifically, the objective of the present article is to evaluate students' engagement in, experience of and attitudes to blending and analyze the strengths and weaknesses thereof. We adopt Kirkpatrick's (1994) Four-Level Training Evaluation Model to explore students' appraisal of the two blended courses and the ways these courses promoted their learning. The results obtained indicate that, although students differ in the extent to which they engaged in blended courses and benefited from the learning opportunities it offered them, blending was unquestionably an added value for a great number of them.

Keywords: blending, language courses, students' learning perceptions/attitudes/ behavior

Introduction

A burning issue dominating current educational debates internationally and locally is the question of the quality of education offered to students. Of the major aspects of such a huge debate are the ways in which and the extent to which information technologies can be deployed to facilitate teaching instruction and enhance students' learning outcomes. The present paper is a

[·] *Languages and Linguistics* 38 (2016), pp.1-22
We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on an earlier version of this article. The names of the authors appear in alphabetic order.

contribution to this debate and as such it is an attempt to explore the role of blended learning in enhancing students' learning.

The aim of the present article is to discuss our experience with blending in two language courses offered to English-major students at Chouaib Doukkali University in Morocco. We discuss the lessons that have been learnt from students' feedback and testimonials over a semester to improve and broaden the experience. We argue that although blending did not necessarily revolutionize our teaching instruction and students' learning, it was an added value that contributed to students' construction of their own knowledge.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of students towards the use of blending in language courses, namely "Study Skills" and "Oral Communication"?
2. What benefits do the students associate with blending in these courses?
3. In what specific aspects of the courses does blending impact students' learning behaviour?
4. What obstacles do the students encounter in these blended courses? How do students perceive the future of blending?

To address these questions, a semi-structured repeated interview was administered to 12 students who took the two blended courses over one semester. The design selected for the study is a mixed methods one: it is partly quantitative but also qualitative as athematic analysis of interview data was also used as a major data analysis procedure. The interviewees' assessment of their experience with the two blended courses was conducted using an adapted version of Kirkpatrick's (1994) model of training program evaluation. Emphasis was laid on probing the students' reactions to the blending and their assessment of what they learned through this experience and how the latter shaped their behavior afterwards. We added a fourth aspect in our analysis, focusing on the perceived obstacles and future prospects from the students' points of view.

In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, the present article is made up of four sections. We first provide a discussion of the theoretical framework then we review the related literature. Afterwards, we discuss the design and methodological procedure adopted in the study and then offer a discussion and analysis of the results obtained. The article concludes with a set of pedagogical implications and limitations of the study. The appendix is included in the last section of this article.

Theoretical framework

The present study is within the framework of the social constructivist theory. According to Mascolol & Fischer (2005), 'Knowledge arises through a process

of active construction'. Emphasis is laid on the collaborative nature of learning and the importance of the socio-cultural context in constructing knowledge and developing students' skills through experiential learning. (Merrill, 1991). In this regard, Jonassen (1994) argues that the constructivist learning environments emphasize knowledge construction through the use of authentic tasks in a meaningful context rather than abstract or de-contextualized instruction. Within this theory of learning, thoughtful reflection on experience is encouraged within the framework of real-world settings or case-based learning instead of predetermined sequences of instruction. Most importantly, constructivism stresses the "collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation, not competition among learners for recognition" (Jonassen, 1991).

The study is equally informed by the social cognitive theory, which argues that learning takes place in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1986). Along the lines of this theory, the individual's knowledge acquisition is viewed as being directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside media influences. Learning occurs when people are able to gain a mental or physical grasp of the material and thus make sense of a subject, an event or a feeling. It also occurs when they use their newly acquired ability or knowledge in conjunction with skills and understanding they already possess.

Blended classrooms offer the students the opportunity to learn through collaborations and to construct their own knowledge. Through sharing feedback with the instructor and with peers beyond the classroom, students engage in the construction of knowledge. Unlike the traditional teacher-led classrooms, blending allows students to learn through the use of the multiple opportunities offered by online technology, including videos, blogging and peer and/or anonymous feedback. Blending also takes students beyond the classroom to the real world and allows them to be exposed to real-life through meaningful and authentic tasks. Moreover, students' exposure to professional communication through, for instance, the videos posted online by professional public speakers and orators, enables them to compare and ultimately enhance their speaking and develop their expressive skills.

2. Literature review

Definition

Blended learning is a relatively new approach to teaching and learning in which traditional and web-based learning are combined. As Graham (2006) defines it, it is the combination of "two different education models, traditional face to face learning and distance learning". It is a learning environment in which face-to-

face contact with the instructors is merged with electronic or distance learning. According to Thorne (2003), blended learning is "a way of meeting the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals by integrating the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning".

Benefits

The literature is abundant with case studies underscoring the benefits of blending. Many scholars stress the fact that a major benefit of blended learning is that it allows students and faculty alike to take advantage of the flexibility and convenience of online delivery of course materials while maintaining the benefits of the face-to-face classroom experience. Unlike purely online or technology-based learning, whose deficiency is the deprivation of students of social and face-to-face interaction with the instructor, blending offers the learners the benefits of both face-to-face contact with the instructor and the learning opportunities of technology (Yılmaz & Orhan, 2010; Throne (2003). Although blending places demands on teachers, it facilitates their teaching instruction and allows students to benefit from the conveniences of online learning combined with the social and instructional interactions in the classroom.

Thanks to blending, students have greater time flexibility, freedom, and convenience and, thus, work at their own pace to have access to unlimited up-to-date online resources. They can use online materials in a variety of ways and at the same time acquire useful skills while using the Internet and computer technology. As blending takes learning beyond the classroom, it also offers students the opportunity to develop a sense of autonomy, interact with and get personalized feedback from peers and teacher. As a result, blending unquestionably leads students to more engagement in their learning because it allows them to reflect on their own learning and to draw on their own learning styles. It also allows teachers to respond to the learning needs of students from different backgrounds and with different learning styles. Moreover, blending allows universities to meet the challenges posed by large classes and limited infrastructure while encouraging collaboration among the faculty.

Of the key issues addressed in the literature on blended learning, its impact on students' school attainment stands out. It is quite controversial in the literature whether the latter unquestionable leads to greater academic achievements. Research indicates that while students oftentimes reported increased improvements in their academic achievements in blended courses, their teachers complained that no significant difference was observed in test results in blended courses as compared with traditional face-to-face or fully online course delivery (Alonso, Manrique, Martinez, & Vines, 2011).

By contrast, and based on The University of Central Florida's long experience with blended learning, for instance, it is suggested that by and large, blended courses lead to higher success rates and lower drop-out rates than face-to-face courses and all online courses (as cited in Dziuban et al., 2006). This finding is corroborated by a meta-analysis of empirical studies by the U.S. Department of Education (2010), which compared learning in face-to-face and online courses; it was concluded that "students who took all or part [e.g., blended] of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction" (p. xiv as cited in Owston, York & Murtha, 2013: p. 2).

In similar terms, Means, Toyama, Murphy and Baki (2013) conducted a meta-analysis consisting in a statistical analysis of research involving participants in different levels in the education system and concerned with the exploration of academic achievements in either fully online or blended learning conditions as compared with face-to-face classroom instruction. The results they obtained indicate that, by and large, "students in online learning conditions performed modestly better than those receiving face-to-face instruction". Significant differences were observed in research that contrasted blended learning with traditional classroom teaching; purely online learning was not statistically significant compared with face-to-face instruction. These findings led the authors to suggest that the interaction that characterizes the blended learning environment - and not the purely technology-rich online environment - explains students' positive learning outcomes and enhanced academic achievement for blended learning.

Kazua and Demirkol (2014), to cite another example, explore high school students' "academic performance by comparing the blended learning environment and traditional learning environment" in a 12th grade biology course. Their results show that a significant difference was observed in academic achievement among the students who studied in blended learning environments; they were more successful compared with their counterparts who studied in traditional learning environment. Interestingly, also, a more significant difference was observed among the female students who studied in a blended environment, which led the authors to argue that blended learning has greater effects on females compared with their male counterparts.

According to Guangying (2014), blended learning improves students' listening and speaking skills. The results of the experimental research conducted among science and technology and physical education students in China stressed the effectiveness of a blended learning approach in improving students' listening and speaking skills. Blended learning did improve students' scores in four standardized English language examinations analyzed over 2 years. The

results of the research also indicate that the blended learning approach equally promoted teacher and student initiative and enhanced the learners' sense of autonomy.

Yang (2011) conducted an experimental study comparing the reading achievement of on-site only and online instruction. The results obtained show that "blended learning was effective in enhancing students' reading proficiency" (p.1). The study showed that students' achievement in reading improved as a result of the fact that the blended environment allowed them to (i) have extensive practice of the reading skills learned in the on-site Instruction, (ii) develop their meta-cognitive awareness around the reading tasks they engaged in as part of the experimental study they participated in and, (iii) engage in massive social interaction as they had the opportunity to discuss with and obtain feedback from peers about the difficulties they face in reading.

In similar terms, Yang (2010) stresses the role of blended learning in improving students' proficiency in an English remedial class. Thanks to the combination of online learning with online feedback from the instructor and peers, the participants in the study managed to develop reading strategies to match their own learning styles, speed and level. It provided them with a high degree of flexibility to choose the reading tasks that matched their needs and interests without being bound by factors such as time and place. Anonymity was also instrumental in enhancing students' reading outcomes, especially for low-level students who did not dare play an important role in the face-to-face classroom context but who had a greater sense of freedom and autonomy when seeking and offering feedback in the online blended environment (see also Yang & Tsai, 2010).

Chafiq et al. (2014) compared the results obtained by students who studied language and communication courses in either a blended environment or a traditional classroom. Their results show that blending improved student writing skills by 95% as opposed to 77% for traditional students. The results also suggest that the use of blended learning with university students majoring in science subjects enabled them to develop better writing skills in language classes compared with students who studied in regular face-to-face classroom contexts.

Furthermore, Giannousi, Vernadakis, Michalopoulos and Kioumourtzoglou (2009) explored the effectiveness of a blended course in terms of students' satisfaction. They report that research does not support the view that students' satisfaction with a course necessarily correlates with their achievement, but they stress that students' satisfaction with a course is an important factor in their accomplishments of its goals and objectives. The results of their study indicate that the students' satisfaction increased

significantly with the blended course; the students reported that they were satisfied with the delivery of the blended course, a factor that enabled them to learn more easily and reduce drop out. The authors suggest the need to offer more blended courses as they ensure a high degree of student satisfaction.

Finally, Mchichi and Afdel (2012) explored Moroccan students' reactions to the use of Moodle in a course for TEFL and ICT majors and computer science majors at Ibn Zohr University at Agadir, Morocco. Their results indicate that participants in the blended mode exhibited favorable attitudes towards this mode of instruction: they viewed it as complementary to class-based teaching and as such considered it a more effective instructional method compared with traditional face-to-face classroom instruction, especially that it facilitated interaction among students.

3. Method

Tools and design

To collect data regarding students' use of blending and their evaluation of the implementation of this technology in the two language courses under investigation, we conducted intensive and repeated interviews with 12 English-major students, 5 male and 7 female. Emphasis of the study was laid on the students' assessment of the use of blending in two semester-one and semester-three language courses, respectively: "Study Skills" and "Oral Communication". Data were collected in November 2015. The study adopts a mixed methods design: a quantitative analysis of interview data is undertaken but a mainly qualitative thematic analysis of the data is conducted (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Blending model

Blending brings together the best of face-to-face instruction and online learning strategies and opportunities. There are three main models of blended learning (see Twigg, 2003: pp 30-5 for a review). The replacement model consists in replacing the number of in-class/face-to-face instruction by more out-of class online activities and tasks, changing the role of the classroom from providing instruction to serving as a form for collaboration among the teacher and the students and sharing feedback. The emporium model, however, eliminates class meetings and learning takes place exclusively in a learning resources centre, and students seek on-demand personalized online assistance. As such, this model is a drastic re-conceptualization of classroom learning. What we selected for our language courses, however, is the third model, "the supplemental model", which maintains the main structure of the course while incorporating technology-based components and online tasks that students can engage at their leisure and beyond the classroom confines. In this regard, we subscribed to Twigg's (2003)

definition that "The supplemental model retains the basic structure of the traditional course particularly the number of class meetings … and add[s] technology-based, out-of-class activities to encourage greater student engagement with course content" (pp:31-32).

A major reason why we selected the supplemental model is that it offers a smooth transition from the traditional structure of the classroom currently at place to a classroom that draws on the opportunities offered by the recent online technology. As such, the model maintains the regular face-to-face contact between the teacher and the students while incorporating the most relevant features of novel technology. We thus used online technology to complement classroom activities, extend our students' learning beyond the classroom and increase time efficiency by engaging them in online foundational material that aims to introduce key concepts in order to make better use of class time. We also used online technology to assist the students in reviewing the material covered in class and in covering complex topics on demand.

The blended courses

The study is based on the implementation of blended learning in two language courses. The first relates to "Study Skills", a course which English-major students take in Semester one. This course aims to help students develop a variety of effective learning strategies ranging from time management and critical thinking skills through reading, note-taking and writing skills to test-testing skills. In blending this course, we posted videos on different study skills with questions and case studies with guiding questions. We also provided students with feedback to help them learn from their mistakes, reflect on their progress, enhance their learning and further improve their performance. As such, students benefited from a formative form of assessment on their current understanding and mastery of skills. The online component was also an opportunity for students to simulate the real-world tasks and engage in critical thinking and problem solving independently of the teacher.

The second course, "Oral communication", aims to improve students' verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Thus, students learn how to use body language to communicate effectively. They also improve their oral fluency through applying appropriate and effective conversation and debating strategies. In tandem with this, students improve their listening and comprehension as well as their critical thinking skills.When blending this course, we posted videos that aim to model effective and appropriate body language, learn debating and presentation skills (i.e. voice, tone, choice of arguments, etc.). In addition, we posted podcasts to allow students to practice their listening skills and model language functions and verbal strategies to negotiate different meanings. Further, we engaged students in blogging so that they can interact online, obtain

and share not only opinions and ideas on a particular topic, but also constructive peer feedback and prepare for in-class discussion.

Analytical Model

As part of the design of our instrument and our data analysis procedures, we adapted Kirkpatrick's (1994) Four-Level Training Evaluation Model, a technique used for the appraisal of the evidence for training programs and the evaluation of whether these programs are likely to meet the needs and requirements of both the organization implementing the training and the staff who will participate. Following this model, emphasis was laid on probing the students' *reaction*to blending and how they perceived the implementation of such an approach in the teaching of the two courses. Second, we explored the students' *learning*, the knowledge they acquired and the skills they developed thanks to blending. Third, we investigated their *behavior*; that is, the ways in which their learning behavior has changed due to blending. Finally, we added one level: the *perceived obstacles and future prospects* which the students associated with blending (see appendix for more details).

Results

Students' "reaction" to blending

The 12 students who took the two blended courses and participated in the present study had a largely, but not totally, positive reaction to the blended learning experience. As the results in Table 1 indicate, out of 67 reactions to 5 statements that aim to assess the students' evaluation of the importance and usefulness of blending, 59 responses consisted in either a strong agreement or agreement; only 8 responses expressed a neutral or negative attitude.

Table 1: Students' "reaction" to blending

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Blending was a beneficial experience	8	5			
Blending has changed my attitude towards learning from being passive dependent to becoming an active/independent learner	4	6	3		
Blended learning courses are more motivating to me as they match my learning style	6	6	3	1	
I started to carry out my academic tasks more efficiently	8	8			
I have developed my self-confidence	4	8	2		
Total	30	33	8	1	0

The students' positive reaction to blending can be explained with reference to the fact that it gave them voice, especially the ones who tend to be silent, shy or introvert. As an instructional method based on the use of Internet technologies and substitution of online communication for face-to-face contact, blending was particularly useful to the students who feared public criticism and their instructors' negative feedback. As such, it was an efficient means through which they managed to develop their self-confidence and motivation to engage in the course and develop the targeted skills. Add to this, online work offered slow learners an opportunity to study and review course materials at their own pace and catch up with the class. In short, blending was positively regarded because it promoted the students' active and independent learning: it allowed them to decide on the time when to study and the pace at which to proceed.

The data obtained through the repeated interviews allowed us to gather rich testimonials that enabled us to probe more deeply into the students' assessment of the blended learning experience. In terms of homework, blending was very instrumental: the "Videos [posted) helped me a lot to practice body language, improve my listening and speaking skills", reported one student. Blending also helped the students to take active part in class discussions. As one student pointed out, "I became more efficient and I felt prepared'. Further, blending enabled the students to obtain instrumental feedback: "I had the chance to see my mistakes and learn from them and for this I say YES to blending", noted a third student.

However, a few students had reservations about the blended learning experience. As one student pointed out, the tasks posted online as take-home assignment lacked clarity in terms of instructions. "Sometimes we don't really fully understand what we are supposed to write or even understand the material", stated one student. This negatively impacts students' motivation: "When I don't understand something, I feel demotivated", reported one student. In addition, despite the multiple opportunities that blending offered the students, some of them complained that the tasks suggested for the course were in general too challenging for the students. As one student pointed out, "Some tasks were difficult". This could be explained with reference to the fact that the Faculty of Letters and the Humanities is an open access institution, and as such many students enroll in the Department of English without having a command of the language prerequisites. As far as feedback is concerned, and despite the benefits of blending, some students complained that they received insufficient feedback while others obtained discouraging feedback. "Sometimes I feel down when the teacher's comments are negative', said one interviewee; "I didn't receive enough feedback", lamented a second one.The dissatisfaction with the type and amount of feedback can be accounted for by the large class size and its adverse

effects on teacher's feedback. Indeed, one of the deleterious outcomes is the reduced feedback to students.

Students' "learning" regarding blending

The majority of the students affirmed that, thanks to blending, they managed to practice and improve their command of oral communication skills. As the figures in Table 2 demonstrate, out of 64 responses we obtained 6 statements related to the role blending played in enabling the students to learn the targeted skills in "Oral Communication" and "Study Skills", 54 responses consisted in either strong agreement or agreement; 5 responses revealed a reaction of being undecided and 5 other responses revealed an attitude of disagreement.

Table 2: Students' "learning" regarding blending

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	disagree	Strongly disagree
I improved my skills in time management, critical thinking and problem solving	5	5		1	
I have more time to reflect on and refer to the relevant course and the research materials when going online than when responding in class	4	5	1	1	
I interact with and get personalized feedback from the teacher	4	7			
I have greater time flexibility, freedom, and convenience and thus can work at my own pace to have access to unlimited up-to-date online resources	2	6	1		
I use my learning styles	5	5	1	1	
I practice and improve my ICT skills	3	3	2	2	
Total	54		10		

The interviewees reported that blending played an important role in facilitating their learning so far as the two courses in question are concerned. Because the students have greater time flexibility, freedom, and convenience, they are able to draw on their own learning style and work at their own pace to have access to unlimited up-to-date online resources. As a result, blending provided them with the opportunity to have more time to reflect on and refer to the relevant course and other research materials when going online than when responding in class. Thanks to the role it played in allowing them to interact with and get personalized feedback from the teacher, blending was equally

instrumental in improving their skills in time management, critical thinking and problem solving. What is more, the students managed not only to learn the targeted skills in each one of the courses but also develop their ICT skills; thus it contributednot only to the development of the technical skills of studying and communicating but also to the personal growth of the students into active and literate citizens who have a good command of the multitude of the 21st century skills. All this is a translation of students' positive attitudes towards the implementation of technology in language teaching and learning and evidence of their passion with technology and its manipulation of educational purposes.

Students' "behaviour" regarding blending

Based on the largely positive attitudes students have towards blending, they underscore that they use it to be exposed to a healthy learning behavior and also to enhance their oral communication skills in a variety of ways.

Based on the results in Table 3, as far as "Study Skills" is concerned, blending helped the students in the following ways, respectively: Do assignments (13), Obtain timely feedback from instructor (11), Interact with the instructor (7) and Work on group projects (5). Face-to-face contact remains the preferred method of learning regarding the following: Discuss course material (12), Present course material content (12), Interact with other students and (12) Work on group projects (11).As for "Oral Communication", blending helped the students do the following: Obtain timely feedback from instructor (9), Do assignments (8), Work on group projects (6), Interact with other students (4) and Interact with the instructor (4).

Table 3: Students' learning "behaviour" regarding blending

	"Study Skills"		**"Oral Communication"**	
	Online	Face-to-face	Online	Face-to-face
Discuss course material	1	12	2	9
Present course material content	1	12	3	8
Do assignments	13	0	8	2
Work on group projects	5	11	6	5
Interact with other students	1	12	4	10
Interact with the instructor	7	6	4	6
Obtain timely feedback from instructor	11	5	9	3
Total	36	54	32	40

In terms of the actual learning behavior, the interview data demonstrate that the students developed the following four skills. First, the students managed to develop the computer skills; as one student affirmed, "I acquired good knowledge of how I can use the computer in a positive way". Second, blending allowed the students to develop healthy affective skills. As they were free to choose the time and location where to study and do the online tasks, their self-esteem improved and they learned from their mistakes at their own pace. As one interviewee stated, "I had freedom to choose the time when to do homework. My self-confidence and self-esteem increased through the teacher's motivational feedback. I also had the chance to learn from my mistakes". Third, and more importantly, this innovative instructional approach helped the students develop the skills targeted in the course, mainly those related to body language, oral communication and study skills. In this respect, one student stated, "I have become self-confident when using my body language at my presentation that I didn't before. I have become well organized and motivated to set goals and ask questions". Similarly, a second student added, "Also, my pronunciation witnessed an improvement". Fourth, because blending allows students a good degree of anonymity, they manage to express themselves freely. "I am an introvert person, so blending was a perfect way to express myself freely and get my voice heard", mentioned one student.

Despite such positive results, the students pointed out that when it comes to their actual learning behavior their face-to-face contact remains predominant over blending: the students' evaluation is that the amount of learning obtained through face-to-face contact with the instructor of either course outweighs their blended learning behavior. Notwithstanding their positive attitude towards blending, the students affirmed that face-to-face contact remains the preferred instructional method through which they develop effective oral communication strategies. This can be explained with reference to the fact that the students associate the teacher's word-of-mouth with authority. This is especially true if we consider that these students are byproducts of the traditional teaching/learning system whereby the teacher is considered the disseminator of worthwhile information.

Perceived obstacles and future prospects

The fourth level in the analytical model adopted in the present article to probe the students' assessment of their blended learning experience consisted in identifying the obstacles they faced while undertaking the experience. In this regard, the students mentioned obstacles that ranged from access-related problems to fear of negative feedback. Many a student pointed out a difficulty in access to the Internet. As one interviewee mentioned, "I think the main

problem is that I don't have a computer", and a second one pointed out "Having only one computer at home" as the only problem faced. A third one reported, "Lack of Internet access due to financial obstacles, time management problem"; "Frankly, I don't have a Wi-Fi at home, but I go to cyber café sometimes", reported a fourth one. A second category of interviewees mentioned they faced no problems whatsoever in the blended courses: "I really did not face any discouraging obstacles". The third category of interviewees, however, stated they were "always afraid of the comments that my teacher will say to me, especially when I do something wrong", noted one interviewee. A second interviewee mentioned difficulties related to instruction: "I sometimes found it difficult to understand the assignments".

Despite the problems the students encountered during the blended experience, they stressed the bright future prospects of such an instructional approach; they were particularly confident in the potential of blending in assisting them with their homework and facilitating their access to the instructors' feedback. In terms of homework, one interviewee stated that "Videos helped me a lot to practice body language and improve my listening and speaking skills", and a second one noted that "Doing homework online will save time for discussion and assessment in the classroom". Therefore, a third interviewee suggested to future students to "Attend F2F and participate and practice online" because they "will have the opportunity to practice more exercises".

So far as feedback is concerned, students stressed the merits of blending in providing them with insights about their performance in the two courses under study. As one interviewee stated, "Getting online feedback from the teacher was an important factor in improving my skills in 'Study Skills' and 'Oral Communication'". "Blending was useful; it helped me avoid making the same mistakes again and again", stated a second interviewee. In other words, "The teacher's feedback is helpful because it helps students to practice and be more prepared. That's why I say yes to blending because you will see better results in the future". Thus, a respondent suggested that students should adopt a positive approach to the feedback provided by their teacher: "Do not take feedback negatively; adopt a positive attitude to learn", reminded a fourth interviewee.

Discussion

The present article examines our experience with blending in two language courses offered to English-major students at Chouaib Doukkali University in Morocco. We used intensive repeated interviews to probe students' attitudes towards the use of blending in two courses: "Study Skills" and "Oral

Communication". We examined the benefits the students associated with blending, the specific aspects of the courses in which blending impacted their learning behavior, the obstacles they encountered in these blended courses and their perceptions of the future of blending.

The results obtained indicate that blending made possible the extension of contact with the students and thus learning beyond the physical classroom; through blending "Study Skills" and "Oral Communication" the Internet afforded the student a personalized learning experience and increased control over the time, place, path, and pace of their learning. In point of fact, the findings of the present research relative to students' testimonials back up our basic claim of blending as an innovative teaching tool that adds value to teaching and learning. As Karagiorgi and Symeou (2005: p.19), argued, blending was thus empowering the students to make choices about how and what they learn shifting them away from the one-size-fits-all approach.

In addition, our results indicate that blending granted the students exposure to positive attitudes and healthy academic modes of behavior that can inform their current and subsequent learning behavior and attitudes. In point of fact, it allowed the students to engage in the construction of their knowledge (development of oral communication and study skills) through authentic tasks and case-based learning and based on thoughtful reflection on experience. For many students, blending contributed to the"collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation, not competition among learners for recognition" (Jonassen, 1994).As a matter of fact, blending "Study Skills" and "Oral Communication" was a good translation of the philosophy of the constructivist and the social cognitive approaches: blending provided the environment in which students played a role in the development of their own oral communication and study skills. This is in line with Bandura's (1977: 22) contention that:

> *Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed.*

Indeed, blending was a good translation of the philosophy of the constructivist approach, which favours "environments in which knowledge, skills, and complexity exist naturally" (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005: p.19). It was equally a good translation of the social cognitive approach, which stresses the social context in the individual's acquisition of knowledge.

Thanks to our use of blending in the aforementioned courses, the students' autonomy and self-monitoring were increased as they obtained online feedback and developed several skills and competencies. They managed to develop the technical skills related to the use of Internet and computer technologies as well as the affective skills related to motivation to learn and self-confidence in the practice of the skills targeted in the two courses under study.They also managed to develop course-related skills relative to the objectives set for each one of the two courses and overcome problems associated with self-expression in the sense that students, especially the "disadvantaged", could voice their concerns and freely express their views.

Implications and Conclusion

Based on the results obtained and discussed above, several implications can be drawn. First, student's motivation should be enhanced through orientation sessions and first-year seminars to be wholeheartedly involved in their blended learning. To this end, more work is needed to ensure that students make the best of blending: this can be achieved through designing tasks that stimulate the students' interest, providing clear and plain instructions to tasks and assuring the students that no matter how negative feedback may be it should be viewed as aiming to inform students' learning. Second, to implement blending more effectively, sufficient financial resources should be invested to address issues of access to technology, namely the establishment of well-equipped laboratories. Third, professional development programs in on-line facilitation are needed to train instructors in using technology and designing instructional software to increase students' construction of knowledge. In this respect, in-service training aimed to improve teachers' skills in providing the students with feedback, which is not only non-derogatory and professional but rather motivating and inspirational, is highly needed.

In conclusion, the present article has addressed the issue of blending in two undergraduate courses in the Department of English at Chouaib Doukkali University: "Study Skills" and "Oral Communication". It has explored the attitudes of students towards the deployment of information technologies and the ways in which it has facilitated their development of the skills targeted in the two courses. The results obtained indicate that although it did not necessarily enable the student to overcome all the obstacles they faced in their learning, it was an added value that contributed to actively engaging students in their own learning and in their construction of their own knowledge.

Limitations and future research

The present research has a few limitations. The first limitation consists in the small sample size. We managed to conduct intensive and repeated interviews

with only 12 students who were willing and committed to provide us with the necessary data. The second limitation is the use of self-reported data, which might have resulted in colouring and exaggerating the answers. Although interviews and questionnaires are the mostly commonly used instruments to probe attitudes and perceptions, observation would have been more effective as a data collection tool.

Further research needs to empirically examine the impact of blending on students' academic attainments in "Study Skills" and "Oral Communication" as measured by their performance on specific tasks. There is also need for research on the ways blending promotes students' learning of specific skills within each one of the other language courses.

Chouaib Doukkali University in El Jadida

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

These interview questions aim to evaluate the experience of blending that was initiated last Fall 2014. It elicits the attitudes of S3 students towards "Study Skills" and "Oral Communication", in which blending was used to promote the teachers' instruction and enhance students' learning. Your views and opinions are crucial for teachers to evaluate this experience and further improve it. Your responses will be treated with strict confidentiality.

A. Demographics

1. **Age: _____**
2. **Sex: _____**
3. **Semester: _____**
4. **Course in which 'blending' was used: _____**

B. Students' "reaction" to blending

5. **Please rate the following based on your experience**

	Strongly agree	**Agree**	**undecided**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
Blending was a beneficial experience					
Blending has changed my attitude towards learning from being passive dependent to becoming an active/independent					

learner					
Blended learning courses are more motivating to me as they match my learning style					
I started to carry out my academic tasks more efficiently					
I have developed my self-confidence					

6. **What did you like most about blended courses in as far as the following items are concerned?**

   "Study Skills"

   *a- Homework*_____

   *b- Class work*_____

   *c- Feedback*_____

   "Oral Communication"

   *a- Homework*_____

   *b- Class work*_____

   *c- Feedback*_____

7. **What do you like least about blended courses?**

   "Study Skills"

   *a. Homework*_____

   *b. Class work*_____

   *c. Feedback*_____

   "Oral Communication"

a. *Homework*_____
_____

b. *Class work*_____
___

c. *Feedback*_____
_____

8. **What are the obstacles that often discouraged you from benefitting from the blended courses?**

_____
_____

C. Students' "learning" regarding blending

9. Please rate the following based on your experience

	Strongly agree	**Agree**	**undecided**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
I improved my skills in time management, critical thinking and problem solving					
I have more time to reflect on and refer to relevant course and other research materials when going online than when responding in class.					
I interact with and get personalized feedback from the teacher					
I have greater time flexibility, freedom, and convenience and thus can work at my own pace to have access to unlimited up-to-date online resources					
I use my learning styles					
I practice improve my ICT skills					

D. Students' "behaviour" regarding blending

10. Considering the face-to-face and blended courses you took in S1 and S2, which instructional method helped you to do the following?

"Study Skills" course

	Online	**Face-to-face**
Discuss course material		
Present course material content		
Do assignments		
Work on group projects		
Interact with other students		
Interact with the instructor		
Obtain timely feedback from instructor		

"Oral Communication" course

	Online	**Face-to-face**
Discuss course material		
Present course material content		
Do assignments		
Work on group projects		
Interact with other students		
Interact with the instructor		
Obtain timely feedback from instructor		

11. Please specify other skills you developed and knowledge you acquired through/thanks to blending:

_____

E. Future prospects

12. What advice would you give to a student new to blended courses?

"Study Skills"

a. Homework

b. Class work

c. *Feedback*

"Oral Communication"

d. Homework

e. Class work

f. *Feedback*

The Effects of a Blended Writing Course on Students' Writing Ability

HICHAM ZYAD*

Abstract

Arguably, writing is the most cognitively demanding language skill with which L2 learners have to grapple en route to increased L2 proficiency. The difficulty in writing emanates from its multi-layered nature incorporating several knowledge bases including sentence-level linguistic features, discourse patterns, stylistic variation, genre familiarity, purpose, audience and much besides. Against this background, the present paper aims to gauge the effects of a blended writing course on semester-one students' writing quality as assessed by holistic ratings and objectives measures of complexity and accuracy. As the intervention period was as short as a semester, the goal was to measure short-term gains in writing ability. The blended writing course brings together the soundness of socio-culturaltheory, the innovativeness of technology, and the strengths of the successive writing approaches from the product-based tradition up to the social turn in writing pedagogy. Capitalizing on an online faculty-sponsored platform called Moodle, college-level semester-one students have access to a wealth of supplementary materials in the form of website links, videos, PowerPoint slides, book chapters, and exercises handouts. Besides the face-to-face work carried out in the classroom, students are required to post their assignments in group blogs and to participate in forums by exchanging feedback and scaffolding one another to reach higher levels of L2 writing proficiency. The implications of the results derived from the application of this blended course of writing instruction are discussed.

Keywords: ELT, innovative practices, blended writing course, Moodle, tertiary education.

Introduction

Writing is increasingly becoming the focus of research conducted worldwide due to the awareness that it is a determining skill, be it in the social, professional or academic sphere. However, despite the successive reform

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programs launched in Morocco since the beginning of the 21st century, no special attention has been directed to writing as a fundamental language skill. It cannot be denied that the National Charter for Education and Training does stipulate that efforts must be multiplied to help learners acquire foreign languages. The effects of such efforts have begun to be felt in the increased attention accorded to English in the Moroccan educational system in recent years. Ennaji (2005) argued that English is systematically competing with French in higher education with more and more students opting for English studies in pursuit of their post-secondary education. Ennaji also mentioned that an increasing number of native Moroccan academics are required to publish their work in English. The growing numbers of Moroccan students choosing to do English studies as well as the requirement for academics to publish in English is not equally matched by a deep concern for writing instruction.

A review of the literature on research concerned with writing pedagogy in Morocco would instantly yield rather disappointing results in terms of quantity. Among the few studies that attempted to research the topic of writing pedagogy is Bouziane (1999), who hypothesized that a threshold needed to be drawn demarcating the educational levels where process writing could be implemented. He argued that process writing could not be implemented in secondary education as students still lacked familiarity with grammatical structures and lexical variety. Haoucha (2005) investigated the effects of collaboration on students' composition skills development in tertiary education. The participants in her study showed significant progress when they did writing activities in collaboration. Other studies, despite their scarcity, focused on superficial textual issues of students' writings, neglecting the latest trends in composition research such as the implications of collaborative learning theory, strategy development or ICT affordances.

Within this context, the present paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the effects of a blended program of writing instruction on the quality of tertiary education students' compositions. More specifically, it seeks to evaluate the short-term impact of face-to-face and online collaborative interactions among semester-one students and between the students and their teacher on the complexity and accuracy of their writing samples. The paper also examines the nature of the feedback that the students exchange among one another. In pursuit of these objectives, the study will attempt to address three research questions:

1. To what extent does the blended writing program improve the students' writing quality as determined by holistic ratings?
2. To what extent does the blended writing program improve students' compositions in terms of complexity and accuracy?

3. What is the nature and effect of the feedback exchanged among the students in the online collaborative interactions?

The article begins by presenting the theoretical framework within which the study is situated as well as reviewing the relevant literature related to writing pedagogy. Following this is an account of the methods and materials used for data collection and analysis. Subsequently, the results are displayed and discussed in light of previous empirical research. Finally, the paper is concluded by offering a number of implications and recommendations with a view to informing future attempts at designing and implementing effective programs of writing instruction in Moroccan tertiary education.

Review of the literature

Socio-cultural theory

The present study is embedded within socio-cultural theory. The rationale behind the choice of this theory lies in the fact that it highly regards the social dimension of the learning process. Vygotsky (1978), the originator of the theory, posited that human learning is basically a process that is mediated by culturally constructed tools, most important of which is language. Socio-cultural theory also stipulates that all cognitive functions start off on the interpsychological plane in the form of dialogical interactions between the learners and more knowledgeable others. Due to the process of internalization, elementary, biological functions become qualitatively transformed into higher cognitive functions. This understanding of the development of cognition offers a non-deterministic, dialectical view of development whereby people affect and are affected by social, cultural, and historical forces in the course of human activity (Engeström, 2001). The implication of this view is that the learner should no longer be seen as a passive recipient of ready-made knowledge but rather as an active and reflective agent in the learning process.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that when children acquire their first language, they gain active control over previously passive biological cognitive processes through the mediation of human speech, a process labeled as self-regulation. From this perspective, language is viewed as a catalyst in shaping perception, attention and memory, eventually leading learners to higher-order cognitive processes. According to sociocultural theory, the process of cognitive self-regulation goes through three main stages. The initial stage is object-regulation and refers to the child's reliance on external objects to make sense of his or her environment. The second stage is termed other-regulation and can be described as the implicit or explicit mediation in the form of prompts, direction, and assistance provided by the child's peers, parents, coaches, and teachers. The last

stage is called self-regulation and occurs when the child gains a certain level of autonomy so that he or she begins to accomplish activities with little or no external help. This is applicable to the learning process as learners require assistance from peers or instructors to ascend to higher cognitive functioning.

Successive writing pedagogies

Undoubtedly, writing is a conspicuously salient tool designed to fulfill a significant range of goals (Louth, McAllister & McAllister, 1993). From a social standpoint, writing works as a medium that sustains contact among friends, colleagues and family. Writing has the power to create fantasy worlds, construct stories, exchange information, and influence opinion. Besides, writing has been considered as a tool for learning as it has been found to support the learning process in relation to other language skills such as reading. For example, Graham and Hebert (2011) found that writing improved students' reading skills with each grade benefiting in a distinctly different way. Writing is also a central requirement for school and academic success.

Writing instruction research is increasingly growing at an exponential rate. Three approaches can be identified in the literature with different foci and theoretical affiliations (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). First, the text-oriented approach regards writing as a textual product and therefore focuses on the linguistic, rhetorical and discursive resources available for writers to draw upon. Growing disenchantment with this paradigm has led to the emergence of the writer-oriented approach. The central concern in research adopting this orientation has been to uncover the processes that occur when proficient writers engage in a writing activity. The objective underlying this line of research is to have learners acquire these processes in order to develop their writing ability. The recognition that writing is a social activity has brought to the forefront the interpersonal function of language. The result of such recognition has been the appearance of the reader-oriented approach to writing instruction, which has underscored the contextual elements of the writing event such as purpose, uses, audience and impact.

From the 1980s onwards, researchers have been experimenting with the process-based approach for writing instruction, finding in the course of research the positive impact of this approach on students' composition skills development (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005).Rather than emphasizing attention to spelling, grammar and other related writing conventions, the process-based approach conceives of writing as a creative and holistic process comprising a series of cognitive and metacognitive sub-processes. Research adopting the process-based approach has identified several important principles characterizing it (Graham &Hebert, 2011). In the planning stage, students

engage in setting goals, collecting ideas and organizing them according to a given logic. Sharing the first draft offers the opportunity to receive feedback that would be used in the revising and editing stages. It should be stressed that the relationship between these steps is not one-directionally linear but it is rather iterative involving much forward and backward movement among the stages as much as the need entails.

Blended and face-to-face collaborative writing: empirical research

Researchers' interest in collaborative writing started out in onsite, face-to-face settings. To illustrate, Kuiken and Vedder (2012) hypothesized that collaborative writing activities have a more positive impact on students' text reconstruction than individual writing activities. Storch (2005) investigated the nature of the dialogues that take place as learners engage in the writing process by comparing students working in pairs and students working individually. It was observed that the texts produced by paired students were shorter but better in terms of the effectiveness of task fulfillment, grammatical accuracy and complexity. More recently, Neumann and McDonough (2014) explored the relationship between the verbal interactions resulting from collaborative prewriting tasks and students' text quality as well as the aspects of their writings they focused on as they critically reflected upon their peers' written productions. The major finding in the study was that the structured prewriting tasks proved to be more effective than the naturally-occurring discussions among the students.

Interest in collaborative writing was revived due to the affordances of fast-emerging social networking technologies. For instance, Zhang, Song and Huang (2014) examined the effects of blog-mediated collaborative activities in a blended writing course. They found that blending granted the students a precious platform for the exchange of feedback with their peers and offered them ample time to extend their contact with writing outside class time. It was also reported that the blog-mediated activities positively affected the students' motivation, collaboration and course satisfaction. Along the same line of research, Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs (2012) examined wed-based, project-oriented, many to many collaborative writing. They found that the participants attended more to form than meaning and that the corrective changes they made were more accurate than inaccurate. They also reported that the students inconsistently participated in the web-based platform, which they used simultaneously for multiple purposes.

Additionally, Challob, Abu Bakar and Latif (2016) investigated the effects of a blended learning approach on EFL students' writing performance and apprehension. The results indicated that students' apprehension of writing

significantly decreased. It was also found that students' writing ability equally improved. In a quasi-experimental study, Geta and Olango (2016) researched the impact of a blended writing course on students' writing development and explored teachers' attitudes towards computer-mediated instruction. Again, they found that the experimental group outperformed the controlled group. They also reported that teachers' attitudes towards computers in education were positive.

Methods and materials

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in the fall of 2015 starting from the second week of October to mid-November in Hassan II University, the school of humanities in Ben M'Sik. The participants were 321 semester-one students at the inception of the study. This number was reduced to 242 participants as 79 students were not consistent in their contributions during the five-week span of the study. This includes students who did not sit for the pretest or failed to post their contributions online as well as those who did not show interest in the collaborative exchange of feedback with their peers.

Main course teachers and raters

The role assumed by the researcher in the present study was to do follow-up activities with semester-one students in the course of paragraph writing with more practice covering aspects of writing at which the students still had some difficulty. In addition, the researcher was responsible for monitoring the students' collaborative interactions on a faculty-sponsored platform called Moodle. This includes provision of teacher feedback, checking on the relevance of peers' feedback and uploading supplementary materials such as videos, presentations, book chapters and exercises. Coordination with the main course teachers was necessary so that the same instructional procedure is uniformly followed with all the participants. The main course teachers were two Moroccan teachers with several years' experience in English studies and one Full-bright visiting scholar from the USA.

The holistic ratings were carried out by two doctoral students with one having a seven-year and the other seventeen-year teaching experience respectivelyin secondary education.The researcher held several meetings with the two raters to discuss the aspects they should focus on in their ratings and also to familiarize them with the checklist they had to abide by when they correct the students' writing samples. The checklist included areas such as organization, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. Each one of these areas was assigned four points with the total being 20. When it was clear the

raters had a clear idea about how they should score the students' writings, they were given 6 randomly selected compositions to score in order to calculate inter-rater reliability. The acceptable level of inter-rater reliability should be equal to or above .70 (Stemler, 2004); that is, 70% agreement between the raters. Calculating inter-rater reliability for the present study based on a measure known as percent agreement, it was found that there was 83% (.83) agreement between the two raters.

Description of the instructional procedure

The study is situated within a blended or hybrid writing program in the sense that it incorporates both onsite and online instruction. The onsite, face-to-face part of the program includes a mini-lesson targeting a particular aspect of writing such as parallelism, fragments, run-ons, tenses or mechanics. The mini-lesson together with some practice to consolidate the structure being taught did not go beyond 30% of the total time of the session. The other 70% should be invested in compositional activities based on the process-oriented approach to writing. The students are assigned a topic to write about and are required to work in groups of four, five or six depending on class size. After they finish the brainstorming stage, they are asked to write the first draft. The first draft is supposed to be posted online in order to be read by both the teacher and the group-mates. In light of the feedback provided, each student has to revise and edit the first draft and post it again online. It should be pointed out that in addition to the discussions that take place in Moodle, the students are provided with plenty of supplementary materials on the aspect of writing tackled in each mini-lesson.

Data collection and analysis tools

The study used a quasi-experimental pre-test/ post-test within-group research design. It used both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools.Writing developmentwas measured by holistic ratings of students' writing samples. A checklist was developed with five major areas; namely, organization, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. For each area, a score of four points was assigned, making a total of 20 points. The same checklist was posted in a Moodle workshop for students to rate their peers' assignments. The score given for each assignment is the cumulative of the scores assigned by the group-mates plus the score assigned by the teacher. If the scores that the students assign to one another are exaggerated, the Moodle workshop enables the teacher to override the students' scores and make them more reasonable.

To redress the subjectivity usually pinned to holistic ratings, the present study used a more objective measure to evaluate growth in syntactic complexity

called the t-unit, which was defined by Hunt (1970) as "a main clause plus all subordinate clauses and non-clausal structures attached to or embedded in it" (p. 4).As regards accuracy, it was measured by number of error-free t-units and the ratio of error-free t-units to the total number of t-units.

The qualitative data were collected from students' feedback comments online. The analysis of such data focused on the nature of the feedback provided, the areas it targeted and the growth in students' ability to cover a wider scope of writing aspects over time. The question of the nature of the feedback provided refers to whether it is focused or unfocused. Focused feedback aims to direct the peer's attention to one definite aspect of writing while unfocused feedback covers several aspects at a time. Another distinction is between direct and indirect feedback. Referring to the writing error by name and providing a correct alternative is what is meant by direct feedback. By contrast, indirect feedback can be given by underlining or highlighting the error, offering a marginal note without naming the error or specifying the number of errors in each paragraph without explicitly referring to them. By area of feedback, reference is made to whether the feedback targets content, organization, grammar, vocabulary or mechanics.

Results

Holistic ratings of pre- and post-tests

The first research question that the present study addressed is the extent to which the blended writing intervention can affect the students' writing quality as determined by holistic ratings. Overall, every writing area increased from the pre-test to the post-test except for content. As can be seen from table 1, the largest increase occurred in mechanics from a mean of 1.5 to 3.5. The second largest increase occurred in grammar and mechanics from a mean of 3 to 4 for each. However, content did not increase, remaining at 3.5. Additionally, the differences among the learners with regard to each writing area decreased as indicated by the smaller standard deviations in the post-test column.

Table 1: mean score gains and standard deviations for each writing area.

Writing area	*Pre-test*	*Post-test*
Organization	2.5 (SD: 3.13)	3 (SD: 2.5)
Content	3.5 (SD: 2.5)	3.5 (SD: 2.7)
Grammar	3 (SD: 2.89)	4 (SD: 1.4)
Vocabulary	3 (SD: 2.89)	4 (SD: 2.3)
Mechanics	1.5 (SD: 1.78)	3.5 (SD: .97)

Figure 1 visually represents the progress made in students' writing samples from the first to the last assignment as determined by automated, holistic ratings. It is noteworthy that the developments of the writing areas can be categorized into three different patterns. Content and mechanics increased steadily from the first to the last assignment while organization and grammar increased in the middle part of the treatment period but they declined sharply in the last assignment. The third pattern is associated with vocabulary which rose to a mean of 4 points in the first assignment, sharply dropped in the second and third assignments and finally jumped to 4 points again in the last assignment.

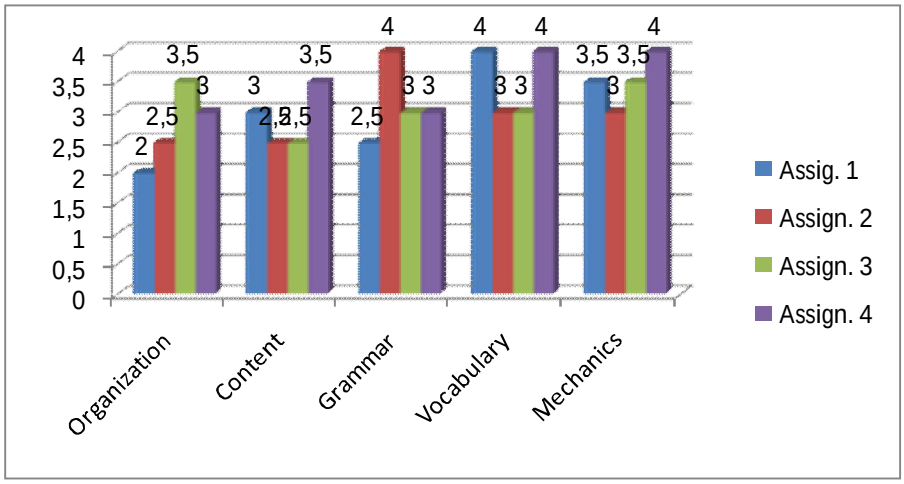

Figure 1: The automated holistic ratings of students' assignments

Growth in complexity and accuracy

The second research question examined the impact of the blended writing intervention on the complexity and accuracy of the students' writing samples. As regards complexity, it was measured by mean length of t-unit (MLT) and number of clauses per t-unit (C/T). Table 2 shows that the MLT increased from 5.2 in the pre-test to 5.3 in the post-test, yielding a slight difference of 0.1. The table also shows a fluctuation in MLT from the first to the last assignment.

Table 2: Complexity measures for students' writing samples

	Pre-test	*Assign. 1*	*Assign. 2*	*Assign. 3*	*Assign. 4*	*Post-test*
MLT	5.2	5.9	5.3	5.7	5.5	5.3
C/T	1.22	1.02	1.37	1.41	1.56	1.53

As for accuracy, it was measured by number of error free t-units (MEFT) and the ratio of error-free t-units to the total number of error-free t-units (REFT to TNT). Again, table 3 indicates thatthe students' writing accuracy jumped from a MEFT of 5.3 in the pre-test to 6.3 in the post-test. However, the MEFT increased from the first to the last assignment although the increase was not systematically upwards. The same can be observed with regard to the REFT to TNT, which increased from 0.26 in the pre-test to 0.31 in the post-test.

Table 3: Accuracy measures of students' writing samples

	Pre-test	*Assign. 1*	*Assign. 2*	*Assign. 3*	*Assign. 4*	*Post-test*
MEFT	5.3	5.1	6.2	5.7	5.9	6.3
REFT to TNT	0.26	0.28	0.33	0.32	0.29	0.31

The effects and nature of feedback on complexity and accuracy on second drafts

The third research question addressed the effects and nature of student-student and teacher student feedback. The first part of the question probed the effects of feedback on students' writing complexity and accuracy on the revised second drafts. Figure 2 reveals that a systematic increase exists from the first to second drafts. Although the second draft in the last assignment dropped to a MLT of 6.5 compared to the penultimate assignment whose second draft rose to 6.7, an observable increase occurred from the second draft in the first assignment (5.9) to the second draft in the last assignment (6.5).

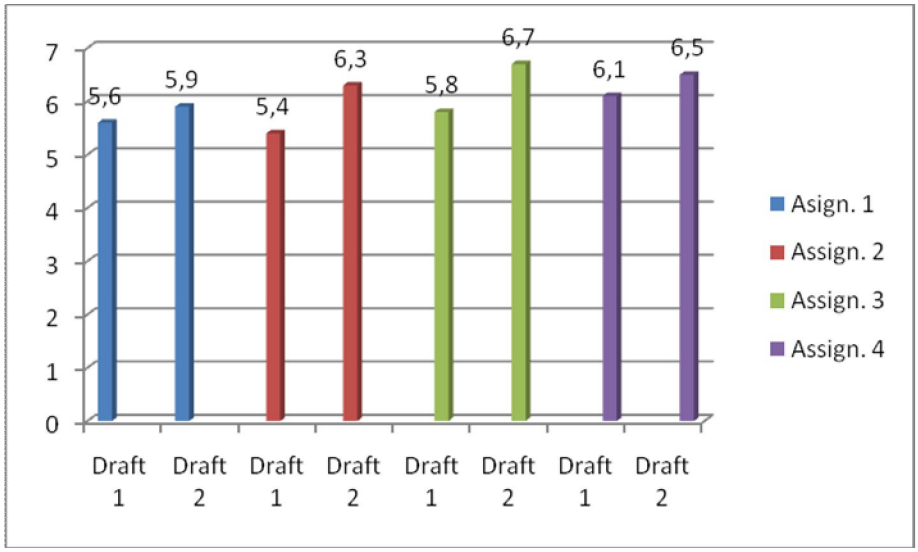

Figure 2: Effects of feedback on complexity

Identical results were obtained regarding accuracy as a function of the shift from first to second drafts. Figure 3 shows that a clear-cut pattern exists between first drafts and second drafts in terms of accuracy. Not only did the increase occur from first to second drafts but also over time from the first to the last assignment.

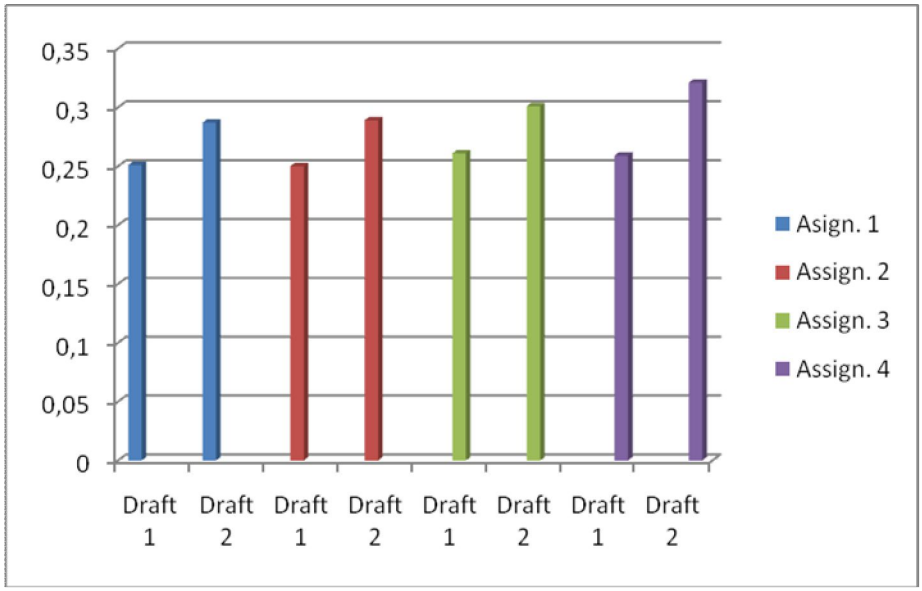

Figure 3: Effects of feedback on accuracy

The nature of the student-student feedback

The qualitative analysis of the feedback-related meta-discursive threads that transpired among the students as they engaged in collaborative process writing provided a means to uncovering valuable micro-level insights. It was found that the collaborative interactions were initially asymmetrical with high-achieving learners monopolizing the discussions and the low-achieving learners passively, oftentimes unquestioningly, accepting the peers' corrections. Sometimes the written corrections were to the point and helped improve low-achieving learners' writing samples as the example below indicates:

Thread 1, group (8):

L: check line three: the past of *run* is *ran* not runned.

P: I did not check the dictionary! Are you sure?

L: I am sure.....

However, sometimes the high-achieving learner gives misguided written corrective feedback as can be illustrated from the example below:

Thread 2, group (3):

M: I think there is something wrong in line one.

B: I can't see nothing (sic)!

M: you need to put an article before *advice.*

B: Ok. Thank you.....

The occurrence of such misleading corrective feedback varied from group to group. Over time, the less capable learners began to take the initiative and offered corrections to the more capable peers. Most of the time,such corrections were responded to by high-achieving learners with skepticism, as can be seen from:

Thread 3, group (5):

G: .....and after the colon you need to have a capital letter.....

H: I don't think that's right!

G: but the teacher says that we use capital letters at the beginning of sentences.....

H: That's right but does a colon mean the end of a sentence?

G: I don't know but....

H: check this site. You will find more information about.....

The feedback that students exchanged with one another was direct and unfocused. Very little room was left for organization and content with the largest part of the feedback being related to grammar and mechanics. As for vocabulary, it occupied rather a small part of the collaborative discussions and

was most of the time in the form of questions soliciting a given word by providing a definition and expecting the exact word in return.Grammar was usually concerned with tenses, articles, pronouns and prepositions in descending order of frequency. The discussions on mechanics centered on periods and commas with very little reference to spelling. The coding of the categories of feedback can be summed up in the table below:

Table 4: Frequency of writing areas and their subcategories in students' feedback

Writing areas	*Sub-categories*	*Frequency*
Grammar(44%)	Tenses	241
	Articles	178
	Pronouns	56
	Prepositions	33
Mechanics (33%)	Periods	67
	Commas	45
	Spelling	25
Vocabulary (16%)	_____	123
Content (5%)	_____	18
Organization (2%)	_____	14

Discussion

The present paper investigates the effects of a blended writing program on semester-one students' writing ability. It aims to explore how this program affects the students' composition skills as determined by holistic ratings. It also examines its impact on their writing samples' complexity and accuracy. Additionally, it explores the nature and effects of the student-student feedback on their posted assignments.

With regard to the first research question, the comparison of the mean score gains of the students' compositions in the pre- and post-tests uncovered systematic increases in all the writing areas being examined except for content. Most probably, content did not make as much progress because it did not receive an equal amount of explicit instruction by the main course teachers as did the other writing areas. The fact that writing mechanics had the largest increase (from 1.5 to 3.5) supports this hypothesis as most of the mini-lessons were about mechanics, followed by grammar and vocabulary. It is noteworthy that the standard deviations steadily shrank as a function of the onsite and online collaborative writing activities in which the students engaged over the intervention period. The groups of students formed for the online interactions were initially heterogeneous with both high-achieving and low-achieving students working together. However, the heterogeneity began to dissipate to

eventually yield more homogeneous groups although this trend is rather slow and uneven from one group to another.

Theoretical and empirical evidence exists to support the above stated results. Vygotsky (1978) theorizes that the social interpersonal interactions among individuals are the main driver for learning. In particular, he posits that learning is situated and activated at the intersection of what a learner can do independently and what he or she can do with assistance, a phenomenon he labeled as the ZPD. Evidently, this is in consonance with the fact that the students in the present study began to partially homogenize in terms of ability of writing and the nature of the feedback exchanged. The widening gap among the mixed ability learners reflected by asymmetrical ZPDs in each group diminished over time as a function of the collaborative interactions in which they regularly engaged.

This theoretical position has been gaining in prominence due to accumulating supportive empirical evidence. Haoucha (2005) reported that onsiteclassroom collaboration among the students during the writing process had a major impact on their writing ability. She indicated that the support poor student writers obtained from their more capable peers did not only encourage more draft revisions but it had cognitive, linguistic and affective benefits as well. Kuiken and Vedder (2012) also provided evidence that text reconstruction carried out collaboratively among the students had a better quality than individual text reconstruction. Storch (2005) found that the languaging (students' dialogues about one another's language) that occurs during writing collaborative activities is conducive to further linguistic gains.

The present study also found that complexity did not increase as much as accuracy did. This can be attributed to two different factors. First, the mini-lessons and the classroom practice were mainly directed at mechanics and grammar issues. The impact that this may have had on the students was an increased concern with form, which led to increased accuracy from the pre- to post-test writing samples. Second, it appears that a four-week writing intervention cannot cause a major transformation in students' writing complexity. Previous research lends support to these two interpretations. Hunt (1977) detected growth in students' writing complexity across grades four, eight and twelve (1.3, 1.4, and 1.68 respectively). The slight increase from grades four to eight shows that complexity needs a prolonged intervention period to exhibit signs of maturity. Additionally, Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs (2012) reported that the web-based collaborative interactions affected students' accuracy more than complexity.

The analysis of the feedback exchanged among the students during the collaborative interactions revealed that the students focused more on micro-level writing issues such as mechanics, grammar and vocabulary in descending order of frequency. Macro-level issues, namely content and organization received very little attention during the online dialogic threads. The preponderance of micro-level writing aspects on students' online discussions may be ascribed to the limited level of their L2 proficiency. This seems to have left them constantly concerned with local aspects of writing at the negligence of more global areas.

It was found that low-achieving learners could not notice their language problems until they were pointed out by their more capable peers. Similarly, high-achieving learners could not notice the mistakes they made in their writings until they were identified by the teacher. Although low-achieving students sometimes referred to some aspects they thought were incorrect in their high-achieving peers' writings, they generally assumed a more passive role. In this respect, Zhang Song, Huang (2014) reported that collaboration in writing activities enabled the learners to pay attention to problematic areas in their compositions that they otherwise would not have noticed if they had worked individually. Kuiken and Vedder (2012) discussed the benefits of the information gap that exists between high- and low-achievers. However, contrary to the finding in the present study that high-achieving learners usually question their low-achieving peers' feedback before they incorporate it into their revised drafts, Kuiken and Vedder found that more proficient learners sometimes accepted the feedback of their less capable peers only because they had a more extroverted personality or more social prestige. Furthermore, Louth, McAllister and McAllister (1993) drew on social psychology literature to allude to the phenomenon known as social loafing whereby poorer students defer responsibility to their intellectually more advantaged peers. The present study detected the potential for long-term benefits as that responsibility deferment would begin to give way to more self-initiative and self-confidence. One indicator of such effects was the slow but increasing tendency for poorer students to start to take the initiative and drew their more capable peers' attention to their language problems.

Conclusions and implications

In sum, the present study found that the students' compositions improved from the pre- to the post-tests as a function of the effects of the blended writing course. However, the improvement affected mechanics, grammar and vocabulary but it did not include content and organization. It was also reported that the blended collaborative writing program affected accuracy more than complexity. Besides, the areas that the students focused on in their online

collaborative interactions were micro-level issues of writing such as mechanics, grammar and vocabulary. These interactions were initially characterized by poorer students' overreliance on their peers for the greatest share of the work but this practice began to subside over time.

Several useful and practical implications can be drawn from these findings. First, assuming that writing is a multi-componential language skill, more focused attention should be geared towards other aspects of writing such as content and organization. This can be operationalized through offering students more opportunities to read and analyze models written by expert writers to help them appreciate the ways in which content can be organized. Second, writing teachers should be aware of the risk of turning a writing course into a grammar course by laying too much emphasis on grammar issues. Rather, a good deal of the course should be based on intensive writing practice while direct instruction of grammatical structures should be kept to a minimum. Third, complexity was found to develop in a rather slow manner, which entails more investment in this important aspect of writing to ensure symmetrical development. One way in which this can be implemented is by engaging learners in more practice on how they can consolidate more non-clausal structures into adjoining clauses to increase the complexity of their compositions. Fourth, the online collaboration among the students was reported to make a difference in the quality of their learning. Therefore, the educational authorities are called upon to encourage writing teachers to increase their use of all sorts of social networking technologies to extend the learning experience outside class time.

Hassan II University

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Innovative Practices in Teaching the "Study Skills" Course: A Comparative Study

HASSAN AIT BOUZID*

Abstract

This article explores ways in which textbook evaluation, a practice conventionally used in high school contexts, can boost the quality of university course books. It presents an evaluation of innovative practices that were used in teaching two "study skills" courses. Two course books developed by two teachers from Chouaib Doukkali University and Ibn Zohr University were examined to identify the extent to which they are innovative in selecting and presenting the course content and in assessing the learning outcomes. A mixed method consisting of content analysis and structured interviews was used to allow for the triangulation of the data. The findings indicated that the two course books presented quasi-similar content, but they differed in the ways in which they enticed learners to interact with the materials. Informed by the analysis of the two course books, general implications related to improving the teaching of the "study skills" course in innovative and effective ways were provided. Eventually, the importance of adapting textbook evaluation to university context was stressed and ways in which it could help in improving the quality of the university course books were suggested.

Key words: *textbook evaluation, study skills, university, course books*

Introduction

Research maintains that textbook evaluation is a very useful tool in high school context, as it has to a great extent effectively contributed to improving the quality of textbooks. In fact, textbook evaluation has been a helpful practice to English language teachers in a number of ways. Pre-use evaluation has been of great assistance to teachers in selecting the textbooks that best suit the needs and interests of the learners while in-use evaluation helps teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks they are using and eventually suggesting ways in which to supplement, modify or replace ineffective activities. Post-use evaluation allows teachers to decide on whether a textbook

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is worth being used as a teaching material again. Textbook evaluation is also a practice that has the potential of boosting teachers' professional development as it requires using a set of strategies and techniques that stimulate reflective teaching practices and critical thinking strategies.

Nevertheless, textbook evaluation practice is less common in the Moroccan university context despite, or because of, the absence of standardized textbooks. University teachers invest a great deal of their time and effort in looking for, selecting and organizing teaching activities that they deem appropriate for designing their own course books. They are at times required to revisit these materials to make necessary modifications to meet the ever-changing needs and interests of the learners. In all and each one of these processes, textbook evaluation can be beneficial to university teachers in promoting the quality of their teaching materials.

This article aims to draw the attention of university teachers to the viability of using textbook evaluation in the university context through demonstrating ways in which this practice can help them improve the quality of their course books. To this end, it presents a comparative evaluation of two "study skills" course books designed by two teachers from two different Moroccan universities. The aim is to investigate innovative practices adopted by these two teachers in selecting, presenting and assessing the content of their "study skills" course books.

The evaluation of "study skills" course books was driven by three main reasons. First, the course itself is an innovation as it has been introduced only recently as part of the new educational reform within the Moroccan university. Second, being a novelty, it is assumed that the course will be challenging to university teachers in terms of selecting the appropriate content that will help them meet the objectives of the course and suit the needs and interests of the learners. It will also present challenges related to organizing and assessing its content. The third reason is that "study skills" is an influential course that has the potential of affecting either positively or negatively how learners learn other courses as it provides them with skills and strategies that will enable them to be active and effective independent learners. "Study skills" course books therefore constitute an interesting raw material that will foreground the viability of integrating the practice of textbook evaluation in the Moroccan university context.

Literature review

"Study skills" is a course that has recently been introduced to Moroccan universities within the 2003 reform. The aim of the course is to empower freshmen with the skills they need to study through university effectively and

successfully. "Study skills", however, is a versatile course as it does not cover a limited or specific content area. In fact, its content varies not only because the needs of individual students vary, but also because the requirements of disciplines differ. An effective "study skills" course should provide students with the skills and learning strategies they need to effectively meet the objectives of the subjects they are studying, so that they can eventually succeed. According to Kerka (2007), "study skills" courses should basically provide learners with three basic categories of skills starting with skills that prepare them for learning, followed by skills that show them how to learn and concluding with skills that allow learners to apply what they learned. Nevertheless, Kerka (2007) identifies three problematic issues in teaching "study skills" courses related to content selection, organization and assessment, respectively.

The first problematic issue in teaching "study skills" courses is related to the selection of the course content. The number of skills and strategies that can possibly be taught is generally overwhelming and impossible to be covered in a single semester. Since the study skills that learners need differ from one discipline to another, Anderson (2002) stresses the eclectic nature of "study skills" courses noting that it is difficult to provide learners with all possible skills and strategies they need but it is more appropriate to identify the skills that learners lack and tackle those that they need most to function best in their career as students. Thus, efficiency becomes of primordial importance to the design of the course and not quantity.

The presentation and organization of the content of a "study skills" course constitutes the third problematic addressed in this study. According to Kerka (2007), a "study skills" course designed for foreign language learners should typically be presented in three main categories of study skills. The first category should include a set of skills that prepare learners to learn including strategies that enable learners to improve their motivation, goal setting, planning, time and space management. The second category encompasses skills and strategies that help learners to acquire, process and retain information. Examples of such skills include, though not limited to, effective reading, effective listening, note-taking, outlining, summarizing and memory aids. The third part of the "study skills" course should contain study skills that enable students to demonstrate and apply what they have learnt in writing assignments, oral presentations and tests. Beckman (2002) and Anderson (2002) add self-monitoring and self-evaluation skills as a fourth category of study skills that allows learners to determine the extent to which a strategy or skill is actually facilitating their learning.

The third problem arises from the absence of a standardized assessment technique that effectively fits the nature of the "study skills" course. Stannard and Basiel (2013) suggest a practice-based model that can be adapted to assessing students' learning outcomes concerning "study skills" courses. The researchers advocate the use of portfolios as they encourage learners to provide evidence of ways in which "study skills" course influences how students learn in other courses. The process of creating a portfolios does not only allow learners to reflect and decide upon which learning activities to include in the portfolio but also give them more room to reflect on their own learning and assess the extent to which they master certain study skills (Cohen, 2003). O'Donoghue (2003) notes that quality teaching requires teachers to be able to design, present, organize and deliver the content of their course in the most innovative ways that correspond to the most recent developments in the fields of course design and assessment. Therefore, teachers need to continuously assess the extent to which the content of their course books suits the ever-changing needs and interests of the learners. One way of effectively effectuating this task is to engage in systematic evaluation of their course books.

Encouraging university teachers to incorporate the practice textbook evaluation as a tool that serves the improvement of their own course books is stimulated by the vital role course books play in the teaching-learning experience at the university. Undeniably, the course book is an essential element in every teaching context since it represents the nucleus of any ELT program. A course book is at the heart of every classroom because it can serve different purposes: it can be used as a core resource, as a source of supplemental material, as an inspiration for classroom activities and even as the curriculum itself. Nevertheless, textbooks at times may lead to an educational failure in some extreme situations if they are not systematically assessed. Only a systematic textbook evaluation that bases itself on concrete predetermined criteria designed especially for the purpose of identifying and suggesting ways of solving problems has the potential of boosting the quality of course books (see Garinger 2002; Khosravani, Motallebzadeh and Ashraf 2014; McDonough and Shaw 2003; Sheldon 1988).

Textbook evaluation is an effective tool of gearing teachers' professional development. Cunningsworth (1995), Ellis (1997) and Litz (2002) agree on the fact that the practice of textbook evaluation requires teachers to move beyond impressionistic assessments because it helps them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of the textbook's content. In fact, reflective textbook evaluation can improve the quality of learning materials and foster professional development through encouraging university teachers to continuously improve their course books in accordance with what they discover during the process of textbook evaluation.

In addition, textbook evaluation promotes lifelong learning since teachers will always engage in evaluating course books as long as these books are used as teaching-learning instruments.

The course book is certainly an essential element in the teaching learning of study skills in the Moroccan university since it helps teachers present, organize and illustrate the course content. Unfortunately, these course books may not be perfect notably those designed, developed and used by individual teachers, which is often the case of many Moroccan university course books. Professional systematic evaluation of the content of these course books would improve their quality through identifying possible weaknesses that may result from bias, inappropriateness, inaccuracy, or incorrectness. These potential problems can only be identified and overcome if teachers themselves engage in the process of evaluating the content of their course books.

Research questions

This study investigates three main research questions:

1. Why should textbook evaluation be implemented in university context?
2. How can it be applied to university course books?
3. What innovative techniques are used in the two "study skills" course books under investigation in terms of selecting, presenting and assessing the content?

Method

This study adopts an exploratory design and uses a mixed method approach relying on semi- structured interviews as a data collection tool and content analysis as a data analysis procedure. In this regard, two university teachers were interviewed using seven standardized open-ended questions that revolved around the innovative practices they included in their "study skills" courses. In addition, qualitative content analysis was used as data analysis technique that served the purpose of analyzing the content of the "study skills" course books to identify their similarities and differences between the two course books in terms of selection of the content, its organization and the assessment techniques they adopted. In addition to unveiling the strengths and weaknesses of the two course books, content analysis was used to reveal the innovative practices that were used in selecting, organizing, presenting and assessing their content.

This study is an in-use evaluation of "study skills" course books. The materials consisted in two "study skills" course books designed by two university teachers from two different Moroccan universities. Both course books were still used for teaching the "study skills" course in the two

universities during the period within which this study was taking place, Fall Semester 2015. The first course book (Henceforth '*Study Skills1'*) was designed by a teacher from the English Studies department of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Chouaib Doukkali, El Jadida. The second course book (henceforth '*Study Skills 2*') was designed by a teacher from the English Studies Department for the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Ibn Zohr University at Agadir.

Findings and discussion

This section presents the results of the qualitative analysis of the two "study skills" course books that were analyzed supported by the findings of interviews of the two teachers who designed the course books. It is divided into three subsections. The first subsection illustrates similarities and differences between the two course books and the second one provides an account of the strengths and weakness of both course books, while the last subsection presents innovative practices that were used by the teachers in designing their course books.

Similarities and differences

Content analysis of the two "study skills" course books reveals a number of similarities and differences concerning the ways in which they select, present and assess their content. The two course books are similar in including background information about the course, stating its objectives and its rationale. They also present sections where they discuss critical thinking skills, learning styles, ways of improving memory, reading and writing processes, note taking strategies and research skills. These contents were presented in the form of definitions, lists of skills and strategies and lists of helpful tips. As for assessment, the two courses use final written exams.

However, differences between the two course books outweigh similarities, according to the findings of content analysis. Concerning the content, *Study Skills 1* belonging to the teacher from Chouaib Doukkali University differs from *Study Skills 2* designed by the teacher from Ibn Zohr University in that it includes a section that helps learners distinguish between high school context and college context. It also includes sections about motivation, stress and test-taking strategies. This course book concludes by providing an appendix of case studies, self-study tests and further readings. On the other hand, *Study Skills 2* differs in that it includes sections about team work skills and oral presentation skills.

The two course books exhibit differences in the way in which they present their content. While *Study Skills 1* relies on videos, case-studies and further readings, *Study Skills2* relies on oral presentations delivered by a group

of students working on the same study skill. In addition to this, a major difference in assessment was discovered through the interviews with the two teachers as the teacher of *Study Skills 2* acknowledged using oral presentations and portfolios along with a final written examination. The use of multiple assessment techniques, the teacher said, allowed students to increase their chances of getting a better grade. Also, using portfolios and oral presentations as assessment techniques reduced absenteeism and increased students' interest in the course. Portfolio, according to the teacher, helped students to recognize the viability of the study skills they learnt in class through encouraging them to gather evidence of different ways in which they used these skills and strategies and applied them to other courses.

Strengths and weaknesses

The two "study skills" course books have a number of strengths and weaknesses. The content analysis of *Study Skills* 1 unveils four major strong points. The first one is that it uses a participatory approach that involves students' feedback, opinions and interests in selecting, modifying and designing the course. According to the teacher, the content of the course book is constantly changing to meet the ever-changing needs and interests of the learners. The second strength of this course book is related to the way its content is organized moving from general study skills to more specific ones, whereas the third one consists in using case-studies as tools that provide students with opportunities where to apply the skills and knowledge they learnt in class using critical thinking and analytical skills to identify problems within various learning situations, analyze them and provide insightful suggestions and solutions to improve students' learning strategies. The fourth strong point of *Study Skills1* resides in its methodology which, according to the teacher, combines blended learning and task-based approach. The course uses multiple teaching-learning techniques including videos, on-line feedback and classroom discussion as well as case-studies which enhance learners' ability to deal with real life-like tasks in which they are faced with learning problems that require using cognitive and metacognitive skills to be solved.

Study skills 2 has also shown several strengths. First, it adopts an eclectic method in selecting the content of the course book focusing mainly on specific study skills and strategies that directly impact the learners' interactions with reading, writing and speaking. In comparison with *Study Skills 1*, *Study Skills 2* excludes those general skills such as motivation, stress and test-taking skills. In addition, the course is mainly student centered since the presentation of the content primarily depends on students' oral presentation. The teacher believes that it is very important to engage students in presenting the content of the course. Along with using the content-based instruction model, a final strong

characteristic of the course, as revealed through interviewing the teacher, resides in using three different but complementary assessment techniques that encouraged learners to do their best all over the semester to improve their final grade. The use of three techniques allows for assessing three different levels of learners' performance, namely, speaking, writing and critical thinking.

The main weakness of the two "study skills" course books is redundancy. In fact, the two course books spend a great deal of time, effort and space teaching skills and strategies that are taught in other subjects. For example, *Study Skills 1* includes sections about reading and writing skills which are taught in two other courses, namely, 'Reading Comprehension' and 'Writing Paragraphs', respectively. However, while interviewing the teacher about such apparent redundancy, he stated that the focus of the two courses is actually different. He emphasized that while 'Writing Paragraphs' aims to help students improve their writing skills, the focus in "study skills" is on the process of writing itself and on the strategies that students should use to improve their writing skills. *Study Skills 2*, on the other hand, includes a section about oral presentation skills which are taught in two other courses, namely, public speaking and spoken English. In the same token, the section about writing the research paper is to a great extent irrelevant because learners will only need it two years later and there is a course that is designed especially for training students on research methodology and skills. In addition, the two 'study skill' course books do not include samples of mock exams at the appendix which would help learners form an idea about the nature and content of the final exam as well as train themselves on the questions and exercises and get emotionally and mentally ready for the real final exam. On a more specific level, the use of only one assessment technique can be seen as another weakness for *Study Skills 1*, whereas the lack of a structured, systematic organization of the content of *Study Skills 2* can be regarded as an organizational weakness.

Innovative practices

Interviews with the two teachers who designed the course books being studied unveiled the innovative practices that were used in teaching study Skills. The teacher of *Study Skills 1* stated that his course "was innovative in a number of ways." First, the teacher stated that one of the innovative practices he used in his course was involving learners in the process of designing and selecting the content of the course book. In fact the teacher stressed the importance of using a participatory approach in which students' feedback is crucial in helping him to select, edit, omit and elaborate different elements of his "study skills" course. The second innovative practice identified by the teacher is the use of ICT in the teaching-learning process through providing student with videos that they had to watch at home before they discuss them in class in addition to providing

students with online feedback on their written paragraphs. Combining blended learning with task-based approach allowed a balance of students' talking time and teacher's talking time because there is more room for student-student discussions fostered by "using case-studies as means of helping learners apply their knowledge and enhance their critical thinking skills" as stated by the teacher of *Study Skills 1*.The course book is also innovative considering the systematic way in which it presented its content moving from general to specific skills, the careful selection of its content and the provision of rich appendixes that provided learners with further readings and exercises.

The teacher of *Study Skills 2* used several innovative practices in teaching his course. According to the teacher, using a content-based instruction approach and focusing on portfolios as means of encouraging students to apply what they learn in "study skills" course to other subjects in addition to enhancing learners' autonomy through making them responsible for the presentation of the content of the course are among the main innovative practices of this "study skills" course. The use of three different assessment techniques, the teacher said, was another innovative practice that allowed assessing different skills and performances at a time.

Implications

In the light of its findings, the present study draws several implications to be generalized in the teaching of "study skills" courses in the Moroccan university. First, teachers should encourage students to provide them with feedback and suggestions as to the content and presentation of the course. The use of a participatory approach which involves students in the decision-making process has the potential of improving the quality of the course as it will directly take into consideration the needs and interests of the learners. The second implication is that teachers should organize the content of their "study skills" course gradually and systematically into three categories as suggested by Anderson (2002) and Kerka (2007). The first category contains skills that enable students to be ready to learn such as personal discipline, planning, organization, self-monitoring and time management. The second category presents skills that aim at helping students acquire new knowledge, namely, note-taking, critical thinking and library research. The last category should include skills that show students how to apply their knowledge and skills such as remembering and test-taking strategies in addition to written and oral expression skills.

The third implication to be drawn from this study is the use of case studies as integral components of the course as they entice students not only to use their analytical critical thinking skills but also to demonstrate their ability to apply what they learnt in class. It is also recommended that teachers move

beyond the traditional assessment technique that depends mainly on final written and use multiple assessment techniques so that they could measure learners' performance by assessing different skills in an attempt to construct a balanced evaluation of the students' writing, speaking and critical thinking skills. Moreover, teachers need to be careful when selecting the content of their "study skills" course not to include skills that are addressed in other courses; otherwise, students would feel that they are studying the same skills twice. Finally, it is recommended that course books include mock exam samples at the appendix so as to help learners have a general idea about the nature and content of the final exam.

Conclusion

The present study aimed at exploring ways in which textbook evaluation can be useful to university teachers in improving the quality of their course books. Its objective was to conduct a comparative analysis of two "study skills" course books designed by two university teachers belonging to two different Moroccan universities in order to investigate the innovative practices that these two teachers used in selecting, presenting and assessing the content of their course books. To this end, a mixed method combining both qualitative content analysis of the content of the course books and semi-structured interviews with the two teachers constituted the backbone of the research method employed in the present study.

This investigation allowed the identification of several similarities and differences between the two course books as well as revealing a number of their strengths and weaknesses regarding the processes of selection, organization and assessment of their content. Eventually, a set of implications and suggestions were addressed to the teachers so as to improve the quality of their "study skills" course books. It is hoped that the present study has highlighted the viability of integrating textbook evaluation as an effective practice that can assist university teachers in selecting, organizing the content of their own course books and identifying their strengths and weaknesses so that they will improve the quality of their teaching materials. Finally, a quantitative analysis of the space allotted to various constituents of "study skills" courses is recommendable because it will undoubtedly contribute to refining the teaching of this course in the Moroccan universities.

Chouaib Doukkali University at El Jadida

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Appendix: Questions for the interview

1. How do you select the content of your 'study skills' course book?
2. What criteria underlie the organization of this content in your course book?
3. What teaching method do you use in teaching your course?

4. What assessment technique(s) do you rely on in evaluating your students' performance?
5. What are some of the innovative practices of your course?
6. How effective are these innovative practices, in your opinion?
7. What would you change about your course/ course book if you were to teach the 'study skills' subject in the future?

Innovative, ICT-enhanced Assessment Options: The Cyber-coaching Model as an Example

BOUCHAIB BENZEHAF[·]

Abstract

The thrust of the argument in this article is that ICT-based innovations in curricula and learning objectives are ineffective if not accompanied with ICT-based innovations in assessment practices (Ferrari, et al, 2009). In this context, the article suggests the cyber-coaching model which is a form of online formative assessment. Grounded in constructivist learning theories, the model consists of providing students with instant, personalized, needs-based and descriptive feedback on the Internet. To test the model, the study examined first year students' writing products which were tracked from first draft to final draft. A questionnaire was also administered to the students regarding their attitudes to the model. Results showed that students' products improved in terms of overall writing performance and language use. The model also helped keep a record on students' progress in writing, and lastly integrate assessment into learning and make it interactive in a framework of partnership. Results of the questionnaire on students' attitudes towards the model showed that an overwhelming majority of students supported the model. A Pearson Chi Square test also revealed a positive association between easy access to technology and interest in the cyber-coaching model. In light of the results, implications are made for a wider incorporation of the cyber-coaching model in Moroccan higher education at different levels.

Key words: E-assessment, cyber-coaching, interaction, e-feedback.

Introduction

Background

A fundamental transformation of higher education is needed today more than ever before to address new skills and competences required in the 21st century. It is believed that ICT has a major role to play in this transformation process as

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it is a key enabler of innovation as well as a key factor in the development of 21st century skills, notably life-long learning, learning to learn and self-regulation skills. While teaching and curricula have witnessed some ICT-based innovations which are reshaping the field of foreign language teaching, an important structure that interlocks well with teaching and learning has been the neglected aspect in these innovative practices, namely, assessment.

Assessment, which may be defined as a procedure or activity that aims to collect information about students' knowledge, attitudes and skills, is an essential component of the teaching/learning process. The importance of assessment stems from the fact that it drives and shapes students' study habits more than curricular guidance or teaching behavior. It is a structure that either supports or hinders innovations in pedagogy and curricula. Thus, unless ICT-based changes take place in all components of the edifice of education, they will not produce the desired results (Ferrari, et al, 2009).

The present article argues that for successful learning outcomes to take place, improvements or transformations are called for in all three components: pedagogy, curricula and assessment. Also, these improvements should happen not in isolation but in an integrated way because the three components are interdependent. The potential of technologies for innovative assessment practices should not be ignored in teachers' daily classroom routines. The point is teachers should use ICT to transform their assessment practices in such a way as to help students learn, deliver feedback in a timely fashion, connect with students wherever they are, and not use assessment merely to measure learning at the end of a unit and categorize students according to results of measurement.

Contributing to such hoped-for shift, the present paper suggests a model of online formative assessment of writing which embeds assessment in instruction and makes the two a seamlessly intertwined process. To that end, the paper makes use of the most simple but simultaneously the most easily accessible technology tools, namely, emails and Micro-soft Word.

The cyber-coaching model is an online form of formative assessment which utilizes the least sophisticated but most accessible technology tools, namely emails and Microsoft Word processing. It has the potential to shift the student's attention away from the concerns of exams to the learning process as it is embedded into instruction and is concerned with progress in learning rather than measurement of learning. The cyber-coaching model puts assessment and technology at the service of instruction in a constructivist approach which creates a learner centered model for e-learning.

Innovative, ICT-enhanced Assessment Options: The Cyber-coaching Model

Cyber-coaching is characterized by goal-oriented feedback which feeds also forward in the sense that it does not address only past learning but also future learning. An analysis of the term reveals the following. The cyber part of the model consists of commonly available online technology, namely email and Microsoft Word. It does not require sophisticated tools and herein lies its attraction and usefulness. The coaching part refers to monitoring students' progress and providing instruction during the process of refining skills. While monitoring students' progress, teaching is adjusted to students' needs in such a way that instruction becomes individualized and effort is exerted to improve future learning.

Rationale, purpose and research questions

The suggestion of the cyber-coaching model is motivated by the observation that assessment is still being conducted in the same old conventional ways with few exceptions. Students submit a hard copy and wait for the professor to read it and return it without feedback or with ineffective feedback that focuses merely on form and not on development of thesis or ideas (Bouzidi, 2009). Additionally, these evaluations are still dominated by the summative mode of assessment which is largely grades-oriented. This is further corroborated by the latest University reform which has done away with continuous assessment to go back to final modes of assessment. Such evaluations are student unfriendly in the sense that at best they fail to motivate students to work harder and at worst they drive them out of the system.

Furthermore, ICT is still under-utilized with the present generation of students who are described as digital natives. There is little design and implementation of formative assessment, let alone ICT-based innovations in formative assessment in higher education, and this "undermine[s] students' intrinsic motivation to learn" (McClam & Sevier, 2010, p. 1461, quoted in Borgioli, 2015). While approaches to teaching and learning as well as curriculum design are being transformed in such a way as to incorporate technology, the field of assessment is still largely conducted in the same traditional, paper-based way.

The purpose of the present study is to explore how one form of online formative assessment, namely cyber-coaching, develops students' writing, and what students' attitudes are towards electronic assessment for learning. To this end, three research questions have been formulated to guide the study:

1. How does cyber-coaching feedback affect students' writing in terms of grammatical structures, thesis development, vocabulary and organization?

2. To what extent do students favor cyberspace assessment of writing?
3. To what extent does easy access to technology correlate with interest in cyber-space assessment in general?

The significance of the study derives from the fact that it contributes to the issue of harnessing assessment for learning purposes and making it ICT-mediated. The study explores how we might make ICT at the service of assessment with a view to promoting student learning. It suggests a transformation of classroom assessment practices in ways that will motivate students to work harder and connect the technology tools they are using with their learning.

Additionally, by uncovering students' attitudes to ICT-based assessment practices, practitioners will be empowered to act according to the nature of these attitudes. The importance of the study of attitudes derives from the fact that they "reflect the way [we] perceive the world around [us], and they are worth studying in their own sake" (Oskamp & Schultz, 2004, p. 5). Lastly, the importance of the study stems also from the fact that it contributes to the opening of a dialogue about how assessment practices should be re-conceptualized in an ICT-rich era.

The article is organized as follows. It provides the theoretical framework within which the study is situated. Next, it provides a review of the literature related to the topic of the present study. Later, a discussion of the methodology adopted in the study is provided followed by results and discussion of the results. In light of the results, the study makes a set of implications at different levels.

Theoretical framework

The study is underpinned by Vygotsky's constructivist learning theory (1978); more particularly, it is situated within the concept of the zone of proximal development (henceforth ZPD). The latter may be defined as the distance between what the student can do unaided and what s/he can do with the aid of an adult or a more capable peer. It presupposes interaction between a more proficient person and a less proficient one. The more proficient person can be the teacher as well as a more capable peer who enables the less proficient one to achieve self-regulation. According to Wells (1999), the ZPD applies to "any situation in which, while participating in an activity, individuals are in the process of developing mastery of a practice or understanding a topic" (p. 333).

Vygotsky's introduction of the ZPD is attributed to his dissatisfaction with the way assessment was conducted. Vygotsky believed that assessment as

it was administered only tested learners' actual level of development at the neglect of their potential ability which was, in his view, equally important, hence the term "ZPD". A related implication from the ZPD for assessment is that the most informative assessments are not tests of independent performance but tests of assisted performance. Assessments, therefore, should center on the size of the ZPD that the student demonstrates. They should also go ahead of student actual development in such a way as to awaken the functions in the ZPD which have not yet matured, the functions which Vygotsky calls "the buds of development".

The cyber-coaching model can be situated in this construct since it caters to each student's developmental needs and provides the background for tests of assisted performance. It enables the teacher to identify each student's ZPD through diagnostic procedures and consequently guide/coach him/her towards the potential developmental level through collaboration, interaction and leading questions. This help/coaching, which can also come from more capable classmates by having students of different abilities work collaboratively, is provided to the student with a view to enabling maturing psychological functions to support independent performance. Moreover, it is facilitated by the use of technology.

ICT, a mediatory artifact in Vygotsky (1986), can make work within each student's ZPD easier. Online interaction can be used to mediate knowledge; it helps the teacher understand what students do not know, what does not lie within their comfort zone but which they can achieve with help from the teacher and classmates. It can, thus, help locate their ZPDs. In sum, cyber-coaching works like scaffolding, thereby reflecting the core concept of ZPD and providing mechanisms of working within it.

Literature review

Information and communication technologies are witnessing unprecedented progress in different domains including instruction. Yet, assessment modes in the ICT-enabled 21st century environment have not been aligned with the innovations that are taking place in teaching, learning and curricula (Redecker, 2013). Using ICT in assessment has been around for more than two decades; yet, in an era where there is increasing emphasis on 21st century skills and competencies, there is an urgent need for relevant modes of measurement that can evaluate and advance learning outcomes appropriately as well as incorporate technology tools that students are already using. Following is an overview of the developments and trends of ICT-enhanced assessment modes:

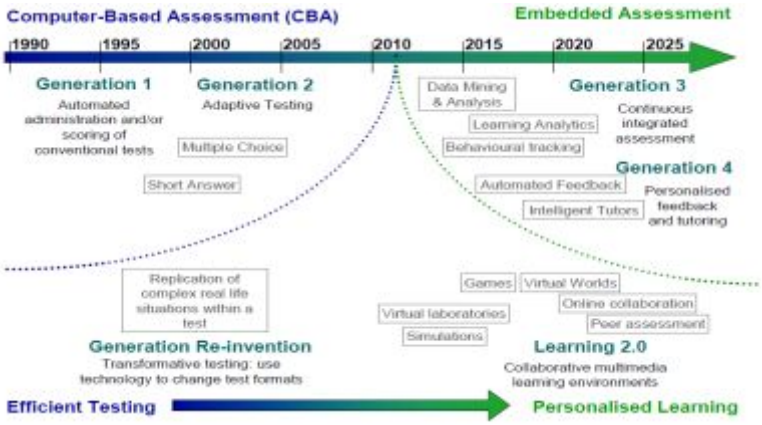


Figure 1: Overview of developments in ICT-enhanced assessment
(elaborated by Redecker, 2013 on the basis of Bunderson, 1989; Martin, 2008; and Bennett, 2010)

The figure shows that ICT-mediated assessments have gone through four generations with 2010 marking the watershed between two different periods. The period before 2010 includes generation 1 and generation 2 during which the focus was on the improvement of testing and the use of computers to increase the efficiency of testing. Generation 1 focused on automated administration and/or scoring of traditional assessments while generation 2 emphasized the notion of adaptive testing. The latter stands for tests tailored to the ability of the examinee in such a way that the computer would raise or lower the difficulty level of questions on the basis of the examinee's performance. Starting from 2010 and moving onwards, generations 1 and 2 are replaced by generation 2 and generation 3. These latest generations abandon testing in order to integrate assessment into instruction. Contrary to what has been prevalent before, assessment becomes an essential component of teaching and learning, with feedback being also an integral part of the process of instruction.

Regarding studies conducted on the use of ICT in assessment, Wingard (2004) reported that educationally purposeful uses of ICT in assignments have the potential to foster more frequent contacts between students and faculty. The study showed that such increased contacts that the email can provide had a positive impact on students' learning which improved as a result of prompt online feedback received from the teachers. Wingard found that even simple uses of the web in teaching fostered a sense of connectedness and raised students' motivation.

Similarly, Bodomo (2009) reported bigger learning gains when emphasis was on life-long learning, autonomy and a high degree of interactivity and engagement. Such skills, he argues, can best be promoted using ICT in instruction since technology tools serve to increase communication and reinforce the learning of natural languages. Bodomo, therefore, recommends increased ICT use in the teaching and learning process to maximize students' learning. Similarly, Theroux (2009) found that use of technology engages and satisfies students. An investigation of students' attitudes by the researcher also showed that a clear majority of pupils preferred online over traditional approach.

Eren (2012) also investigated students' attitudes towards the use of social networking sites in learning. The study was carried out at the University of Gaziantep, Turkey with 48 undergraduate students who were enrolled in one year compulsory English preparatory class. The main findings showed that students have very positive attitudes towards the use of social networking tools, and that these positive attitudes reflect positively on students' study habits. Such finding underscores the need to respond to these positive attitudes on the part of the practitioners.

Foroutan, Noordin and Hamzah (2013) compared the effect of conventional tools, as pen-and-paper, and e-mail on the writing performance of students in terms of content, organization, language use, vocabulary and mechanics. To this end, they recruited forty two University English major students who were randomly assigned into two groups, namely: pen-and-paper dialogue journal and e-mail dialogue journal. Pre and post writing tests were administered to identify the two groups' differences in their writing performance scores. After going through seven week intervention, quantitative research results revealed that the e-mail group outperformed the control group in overall writing performance and language use. With the empirical data obtained in the study, the researchers concluded that e-mail serves as a suitable tool to assist language learners to improve their writing performance.

In another longitudinal study, Ene (2014) researched the type of e-feedback that was provided to the students and the relationship between teacher feedback and uptake. The findings showed that most of the teachers' electronic feedback consisted of comments that were mostly explicit, principled, systematic, and needs-based. It was also shown that electronic feedback was successful at eliciting appropriate revisions of grammatical structures, content and organization. The researcher came to the conclusion that electronic feedback is effective since it led to strong learner uptake and therefore it should be part of teachers' daily practices.

Baleni (2015) researched the impact of online formative assessment in the context of higher education. He found that online interactive formative feedback nurtured a student and assessment centered focus. More specifically, it improved student commitment, speeded feedback, reduced student stress and enhanced flexibility around time and place of taking the assessment task. An investigation of students' attitudes to the model also showed that the majority of the participants in the study (83%) were in favour of online formative assessment.

By and large, studies investigating the impact of ICT-mediated assessment options are still hard to come by. However, the few studies conducted so far have underscored the important role of technologies in creating environments to assess students' achievements in a more nuanced and multi-faceted manner. The merit of these technologies is that they allow for the provision of feedback at virtually every step of the learning process, thus enabling learners to modify their products accordingly, harness technology for learning and eventually improve standards. The present study tries to consolidate research into ICT-mediated assessment options.

Methodology

The setting is the Faculty of Arts and Human sciences, Chouaib Doukkali University which is situated in El Jadida. A group of first year students enrolled in the English department took part in the study by submitting their work via the Internet to the teacher/researcher. Fifty five students also filled in a questionnaire related to students' attitudes towards e-assessment in general. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 39 and they consisted of 32 females and 23 males.

Convenience sampling was the statistical method used to draw representative data from the population of students. It is one of the most commonly used sampling procedures in second language acquisition studies. It was adopted in the present study because education contexts allow only for non-probability sampling and not for randomization of sampling. Though it does not give equal chance to all individuals to be recruited in the study, it has several advantages; first, it is cost effective and time efficient. Second, it facilitates collection of data as the subjects in convenience sampling are more readily available than in probability sampling.

The students were coached on the Internet by the teacher from the very first draft until the last one. Coaching was given in such a way as to help the student discover the mistake by him/herself; thus, feedback was implicit at first and became highly explicit only in later stages when the student could not find

the mistake or correct it on his/her own. The students' texts were first error-identified via highlighting, and the learners were asked to self-correct and re-submit. Checklists were also provided to the students charting different writing areas. Then explanations about the nature of the incorrect form were given to help the learner find a correct alternative and resubmit once again. Finally, the correct form was provided as a final option in case the student did not manage to reach the correct form. Analysis of a sample of students' products was used to investigate students' gains from the process of online formative assessment.

In addition to students' products, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of fifty five students. Questionnaires are widely used in research because, according to Nunan (1992), they are successful at obtaining "a snapshot of conditions, attitudes, and/or events at a single point in time" (Nunan, 1992, p. 140). Therefore, a questionnaire was selected as a data collection technique because of its multiple benefits. First of all, it is cost effective in terms of money and time as it can be administered to a large number of people in one place, thereby providing a high proportion of usable responses. Second, a questionnaire has the advantage of being anonymous, which would encourage the respondents to feel at ease and to freely express themselves. Third, a questionnaire provides the respondents with ample time to deeply think about their answers since they are usually not required to fill out the questionnaire on the spot. Lastly, a questionnaire is more objective as the researcher's influence is reduced more in a questionnaire than in an interview, for instance.

The questionnaire used in the present study consisted of three binary questions and one open-ended question, all related to perceptions regarding electronic formative assessment. The first question asked the students if they had easy access to technology while the other questions were related to interest in e-assessment and reasons behind (dis)interest in it. The students were required to write down comments related to their perceptions of electronic assessment.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data and generate frequencies. Also, a Pearson Chi-Square test was used to test the association between easy access to technology and interest in electronic formative assessment. Pearson Chi-Square test is the most common type of Chi Square tests which allow for the testing of the independence of two categorical variables. The following table summarizes information about different procedures followed in the study:

Course	Remedial writing
Objectives	Well-developed content: thesis statement, grammar structures, vocabulary, mechanics, …
Target group	1st year students (2014-2015)
Time	Semester 2
Data collection tools	Student's products e-communicated + Questionnaire
Design	Exploratory
Analytic tools	Sample analysis + Descriptive statistics (SPSS)
Teacher role	Counseling, coaching via type-written comment

Table 1: Procedures adopted in the present study

Results

Research question one

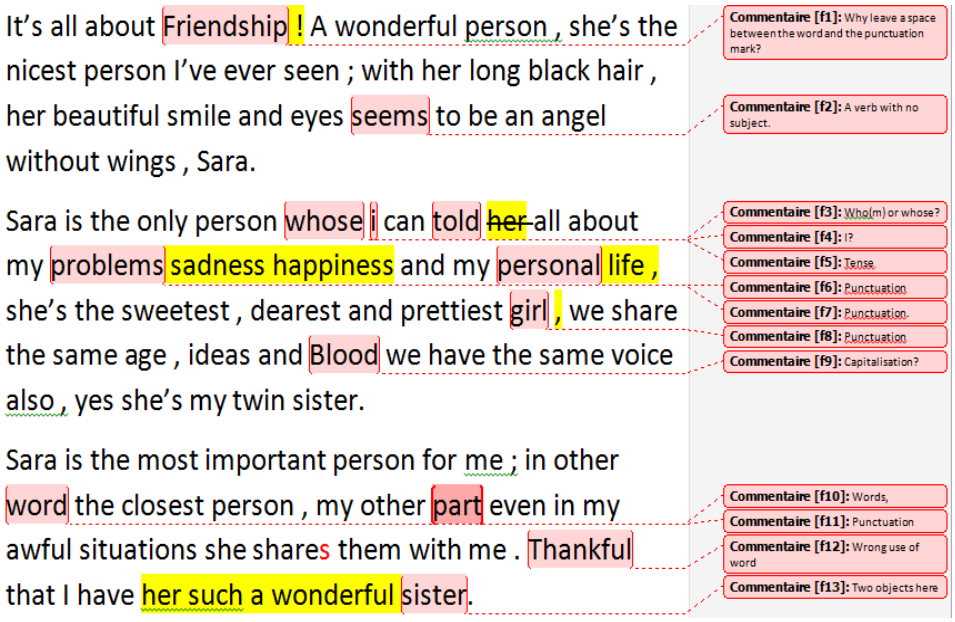
Concerning research question one, the results obtained through the implementation of the model indicate that students interacted with the teacher/researcher more often to ask about solutions to their problems and to ask for help to finalize their pieces of writing. Upon receiving comment and feedback, they re-wrote and resubmitted. However, they were not provided with ready-made answers to their problems but were guided to find answers by themselves. They were also given checklists that allowed them to check their pieces of writing by themselves.

Students also received analytic rubrics (focusing on different areas in writing: mechanics, organization, vocabulary, thesis development, grammar) that helped them check their pieces of writing before submitting them. It also enabled them to self-correct and understand how grades are given in summative final assessments. Such rubrics obviously communicated to the students what is valued in writing and what it takes to be successful so that they attempt to accentuate it in future works.

Students submitted their work on-line and similarly received feedback online from both the teacher and peers. They rewrote in response to that feedback which was given in a timely fashion and also on demand. The more students asked for feedback, the more they received it from either teacher or classmate or from both. Teacher feedback was individualized, needs-based, and only gradually made more explicit.

Feedback from the teacher first highlighted students' mistakes and asked them to make corrections accordingly and resubmit; on a second occasion, the students were provided with explanations about the mistakes they

could not correct and they were allowed to correct in light of that. On the last occasion, they were given the correct form when they could not self-correct. Most of the time, few mistakes persisted as students were also encouraged to receive feedback from classmates. Over all, students made revisions of grammar structures, thesis statement, mechanics, and word choice. Following is an example of in-text feedback about a piece of writing:



An investigation of students' multiple drafts revealed signs of improvements in terms of the afore-mentioned aspects of writing (thesis statement, mechanics, grammar structures and word choice). For instance, from draft 1 to draft 3, the above text improved in the following way:

> *Friendship is a valuable asset. For instance, I had a friend who was my twin sister. She had long black hair, wide eyes, and a beautiful smile. Sara was her name and she was like an angel without wings.*
>
> *She was the only person I could trust. She kept my secrets; she did not tell anyone about them. We were the same age and we shared many things. We had same ideas; and we thought in the same way.*
>
> *Sara is the most important person in my life. I cannot live without her. I am very happy I have her.*

Obviously, changes were made from first draft to third one at different levels: vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and thesis development. All areas increased from the first to the last draft. However, for all students, mechanics was the area in which the biggest progress was made followed by grammar. This provides proof that students were benefiting from feedback received promptly on the Internet. As the aim was formative and not summative assessment, grades were withheld.

Research question two

Regarding research question two, the results obtained from the questionnaire indicated that students overwhelmingly favoured cyber-space assessment of learning in general and cyber-coaching in the skill of writing in particular. It was also found that the majority of the participants had access to technology. The following table provides the details:

Table 2: Results of binary questions

Item	Yes	%	No	%
Easy access to technology	46	83.6	9	16.4
Interest in learning with computers	50	90.9	5	9.1
Interest in cyber-coaching	49	89.1	6	10.9

The table shows that an overwhelming majority of students had easy access to technology with 83.6% of the participants responding yes versus only 16.4% who said they did not have easy access to technology. Similarly, an important percentage of the respondents, namely 90.9%, claimed being interested in learning with computers as opposed to only 9.1%. Likewise, 89.1% of the

participants said that they were interested in receiving cyber-coaching from their teachers.

To a related open-ended question regarding why students favored e-assessment in general and cyber-coaching in particular, the over-arching themes that were suggested came as follows: efficiency, accessibility and privacy. Other answers pointed to linking school with the outside, with a few students (10 participants) saying that cyber-coaching extended learning outside the classroom. Two other participants emphasized the pragmatic function of technology use indicating that the model helped them use technology in such a way that it served educational functions instead of recreational ones only.

Research question three

Concerning the third research question of correlations, a Pearson Chi Square test revealed that there was a positive association between easy access to technology and interest in cyber-coaching with the p value set at below 0.005. The following table provides more details:

Table 3: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	34,422[a]	1	,000		
Continuity Correction[b]	27,904	1	,000		
Likelihood Ratio	26,450	1	,000		
Fisher's Exact Test				,000	,000
Linear-by-Linear Association	33,796	1	,000		
N of Valid Cases	55				

a. 1 cells (25,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,98.
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Cramer's V indicated that the size effect of this association was a strong one with a value of .791. The following table gives more details:

Table 4: Symmetric measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	,791	,000
	Cramer's V	,791	,000
N of Valid Cases		55	

Discussion

The present article has investigated the effects of an online form of formative assessment, namely, the cyber-coaching model, on semester-one students' writing ability. It explores how this model affects the students' composition skills as determined by the changes that students incorporate in their writing productions as a consequence of the coaching that they receive via the Internet from teacher and peers. The study also investigates students' attitudes to this model and the extent to which attitudes are governed by access to technology.

With regard to the first research question, the results indicate that there is a positive change in students' writing as a result of the introduction of the cyber-coaching model. The participants demonstrated their will to accept and accommodate comments making revisions in light of the feedback they received from the teacher and from classmates. Use of technology provided students with constructive feedback that saved their face as it was not in public as traditional assessment environments would do. The feedback was also gradually explicit, individualized, systematic, and needs-based.

To help students identify problems and address them before submitting their work, they were also given rubrics which enabled them to share the vision of good work with the teacher. The approach of sharing rubrics and checklists with students is consistent with the philosophy that students' engagement in and their accountability for their learning are promoted when they understand the criteria against which they are being assessed. Thus, it came as a natural outcome that students' products improved in terms of grammar, thesis statement, mechanics and word choice as the example above (results) shows. In mechanics, improvements were the biggest. This may be due to the fact that students were required and reminded now and again of the conventions they should follow, namely, Times New Romans, size 12, indentation, capitalization and punctuation.

Such findings reinforce the idea that when ICT mediates assessment, important learning gains are made. Similarly, interaction is promoted between students and teacher as students contact the teacher and each other as many times as they need help. Hence, cyber-coaching leads to the creation of a network of learners exposing their work from the very beginning until the final stage of writing and receiving feedback in all stages of writing.

These findings are both theoretically and empirically supported. As regards theoretical foundations, the ZPD (Vygotsky (1978) and scaffolding (Wood, et al, 1976) provide the explanations for these changes. The feedback that was provided to the students worked as scaffolding (Wood, et al, 1976), thereby reflecting the core concept of the zone of proximal development. The model suggested here enabled working individually with each student, diagnosing his/her problem areas and, thus identifying each student's ZPD and working within it to extend it to higher levels. Consequently, the cyber-coaching model served as a framework that transformed assessment in such a way as to make it at the service of learning. Accordingly, assessment shifts from being summative, occurring at the end, to being dynamic, punctuating instruction and responding to students' needs. In so being, assessment becomes a teaching tool that aims at identifying students' learning needs and meeting them instead of merely measuring them.

The results are also in line with the research. For instance, Ene (2014) reported that electronic feedback was successful at eliciting appropriate revisions of grammatical structures, content and organization, and that it led to strong learner uptake. The students who participated in the present study also made revisions in terms of grammar structures, mechanics, content and organization. Similarly, Bodomo (2009) reported bigger learning gains when ICT mediated the development of life-long learning, autonomy and a high degree of interactivity and engagement. Obviously, the cyber-coaching model promotes these skills as it trains students to extend learning outside of school, promotes interaction with teacher and peers and fosters learning-to-learn skills by, for instance, enabling students to self and peer assess through checklists and rubrics.

These results are also in line with Foroutan et al's (2013) experimental study which reported that use of e-mail dialogue journal served as a suitable tool that assisted language learners to improve their writing performance. Likewise, the present study showed that technology tools, even as simple as emails, maximized students' learning by harnessing assessment for learning purposes rather than measurement objectives. ICT helped get in touch with students regardless of time and place and provide them with coaching that helped them improve their writing products. From a sociocultural perspective,

ICT worked as a mediatory artifact (Vygotsky, 1986) that speeded feedback, enhanced learning and motivated students.

However, a problem that was raised and needs to be addressed is the lack of commitment on the part of a category of students. Some students, for instance, did not submit their work while others submitted but did not show signs of incorporating the feedback that was provided to them. This raises the challenging question of how to motivate this important category of students who exhibit unwillingness to engage in learning. Another issue that the study brought to light was the fact that disinterested students were more male than female; that is, boys were less engaged with the process than girls. This, however, can be interpreted in terms of correlations with academic achievement, meaning that girls are known today for being more committed to learning than boys. It is also in line with the report issued by EPI (English Proficiency Index) in November 2015 which showed that the average score for females in Morocco is 51.21 versus 48.17 for males. The score achieved by Moroccan females was close to the global average while that obtained by males fell behind. Notwithstanding, it is also related to the first problem of lack of engagement, and it needs to be addressed seriously.

The results obtained from the questionnaire support the findings obtained from the assessment initiative. The overwhelming majority of the respondents have indicated that they have easy access to technology, that they are interested in learning with technology, and that they favor cyber-coaching. Pearson Chi Square test also revealed a positive association between the variable of easy access to technology and interest in the cyber-coaching model, thereby placing a high premium on the need to make technology tools widely available at affordable prices. Students' positive attitudes towards the use of technology in this study are also in line with the literature review as Eren (2012) and Baleni (2015) also reported positive attitudes of students towards social networking tools and online formative assessment respectively. Such positive attitudes make it imperative on practitioners to respond to these needs and exploit them for bigger learning gains by incorporating ICT in assessment practices.

All in all, the findings obtained from this study are consistent with the research. ICT increased contact between faculty and students, and such contact had a positive impact on students' writing as it was based on prompt online feedback. Findings of the present study also indicated that interaction between teacher and students increased, thereby leading to improvement of learning. We conclude, therefore, that even simple uses of the web in teaching can have far reaching effects on students' learning, can foster a sense of connectedness and raise students' motivation levels.

Implications

The results of the present study have implications on different levels. For an ICT-enhanced learner-centered approach, the following recommendations need to be taken into account.

At the level of research, more attention should be given to exploring and studying innovative assessment options. Research should also promote and disseminate best practices among practitioners. In this regard, ICT in assessment should receive due attention in order to cope with the exponential increase of ICT-based innovations. One data collection tool in the present study was questionnaires which provided access to reality from the perspectives of the respondents. This could be corroborated in future studies by data collection tools that rely on more than self-reported data, particularly an experimental study with a longitudinal design.

At the level of policy-makers, more infra-structure with an ICT-rich environment needs to be created in order to lay the ground for independent life-long learning. ICT tools should also be made available at affordable prices to encourage all students to buy and use them. Practical models which make a blend between technology, pedagogy and assessment should also be within reach of all practitioners so that they can teach and assess in more effective ways, ways that link assessment with learning. Above all, policy makers need to remove all the barriers that stand in the way of using ICT in learning and assessment.

Teachers, in turn, should foster a coaching relationship with their students and establish a routine of immediacy for feedback which should also be descriptive, personalized and tailor-made. More efforts are needed to increase students' motivation to learn and to help them become autonomous learners. In addition, teachers need to prepare for an increasingly paper-less assessment culture. To this end, blogs, wikis, and e-portfolios can be used to support the innovations taking place in teaching approach and curriculum. On another note, teachers should provide their students with rubrics so as to empower them to self and peer-assess. These are two skills which are pre-requisites for the 21st century as they promote greater responsibility for learning.

Lastly, learners should also commit themselves to learning and engage in life-long learning. Self and peer assessment should also be their concerns so as to become autonomous learners. Above all, the learners should harness their use of technology tools in such a way as to put them at the service of learning. If these technology tools are part of students' everyday life, the students are called upon to use them to promote their learning and increase their know-how. They

should know that learning happens in the intersection between digital resources, curriculum, teachers and themselves.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the impact of the cyber-coaching model on first year students. Results showed that the model has several benefits. First, it helped improve students' writing by embedding assessment in instruction. Second, it helped remove the focus of assessment from testing to learning and tailor feedback to students' needs and make it appropriate for higher levels of thinking. Third, it accelerated the process of giving feedback and helped students act on it before it lost its effect. Fourth, Students, also, became more aware of how they were learning as they recognized their own strengths and weaknesses on an individual basis and identified ways in which perceived weaknesses could be improved and strengths reinforced. This point was achieved thanks to the checklists and rubrics which were provided to the students.

On another note, the model helped the teacher/researcher track students' learning, keep a record on their personal growth, personalize and expedite feedback, and lastly integrate assessment into learning and make it interactive in a framework of partnership. Indeed, integration of technology in assessment has helped extend students' learning outside the classroom and identify new ways of teacher collaboration with students. It has also enhanced flexibility around time and place of receiving feedback and responding accordingly.

The study also showed that the model was favored by the students who liked to put technology to educational uses. In this way, the cyber-coaching model roots assessment in learning, thereby connecting with the zone of proximal development which was a theory more about assessment that promotes learning than a theory of learning.

As such, the cyber-coaching model can be considered one of the best interventions in learning/teaching as it provides help when help is needed. Moreover, it can be described as a praxis-based model that targets the development of maturing functions and the assessment of assisted performance rather than the assessment of only existing functions. Such being the case, the cyber-coaching model provides students with scaffolding and stretches their abilities through assisted zones to independent ones.

The model, though, constitutes only one such way of digitizing assessment. Teachers are called upon to think of other important tools like the e-portfolio, which refers to the digital collection of a student's essays, blogs and

wikis. All these tools have the potential to improve students' learning if exploited for educational purposes as they can make studying more collaborative and efficient. Teachers need to connect with their students by making themselves available to them on the very social networking tools that the students are already using. Being available to students in this way will certainly motivate students, inspire them, and engage them in learning. This article has contributed to the opening of a dialogue about e-assessment in higher education; more specifically, it has invited practitioners to think about design, implementation and objectives of e-assessment. Such a dialogue should continue and should be supported by more ICT-based studies and practices.

Chouaib Doukkali University at El Jadida

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Digital Learning Resource Development and Flipped Learning-Innovative Teaching of "Introductory Phonetics"*

KARIM BENSOUKAS

Abstract

This article provides a description as well as a first evaluation of our experience with Flipped Learning (Flip) in teaching phonetics to undergraduate students at a Moroccan university. We developed screencast video lectures to deliver direct content and devoted class time for one-on-one activities. Viewing lectures before class sessions, students have better opportunities to (i) learn at their individual paces at home, and (ii) collaborate and devote more time to classroom activities, including tasks traditionally assigned as homework. The expected outcome is that integrating ICT in teaching phonetics coupled with Flip will yield better learning results. The method comes with a challenge, though: it requires teachers skilled in developing digital learning resources (DLRs).Three lessons can be learnt from the experience, however: (i) in developing DLRs for Flip, expenses can indeed be kept to a minimum; (ii) Flip saves valuable class time for hands-on activities; and (iii) students' very positive reactions to Flipped phonetics are an indication of its success.

Introduction

FlippedLearning (henceforth Flip) is a constructivist, learner-based pedagogy that uses video lectures to deliver direct content instruction and class time for one-on-one education (Brame, 2013; Bergman and Sams, 2012; Berrett, 2012; Educause, 2012; Flipped Learning Network, 2013, 2014; Hamdan et al., 2013a-b; Kim et al., 2014; Lage et al., 2000; O'Flaherty and Phillips, 2015; Ryan,

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2013, inter alia; for reviews see Bishop and Verleger, 2013; Bormann, 2014; Giannakos et al., 2014). Flip pedagogy has been adopted in English studies (AbdElfatah, 2016; Shermila, 2015; Hung, 2015; Sung, 2015) as well as phonetics/phonology (Ashby, 2011b, 2013; Setter, 2015).[1]The basic insight is that viewing video lectures at home before face-to-face class sessions provides students with better opportunities to (i) learn at their individual paces at home, and (ii) collaborate and devote more time to classroom activities, which may include that traditionally assigned as homework.

"Flipped Phonetics" is an innovative method we adopted in teaching a component of a linguistics course, Semester 4 introductory phonetics, at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. The expected outcome is that Flip and integrating ICT in a technical course like phonetics will yield better learning results. The method is very challenging, though in addition to the difficulty inherent in it, it requires the teacher to be at the same time a subject-matter expert and a developer of digital learning resources (DLRs) (see Guri-Rosenblit, 2009; Reddi and Mishra, 2003).

Presenting our Flipped Phonetics experience, this article also contributes to the ongoing debate on ICT integration, and more effective learning in higher education in Morocco, in general, and English Studies, in particular. After briefly describing the phonetics course content in §2, pointing to the difficulty involved and surveying the teaching methods we used previously, we review in §3 Flipped Learning and the relevant aspects of DLR development. In §4, we provide a description of the flipped phonetics project we undertook, a first evaluation of which is in §5.

Introduction to Phonetics: The difficulty

Content and challenges

Introduction to Articulatory Phonetics is a component of a linguistics course which also serves as an introductionto phonology, morphology and syntax.A related but separate course offered concurrently covers other components, e.g. general, applied, and sociolinguistics.

Content-wise, focus is on articulatory phonetics, i.e. the details of consonant and vowel sound articulation (auditory and acoustic phonetics described just cursorily). Students are supposed to know in fair detail the vocal organs and their role in articulation. Pulmonic, glottalic and velaricair stream mechanisms are an important component in that they are the basis of consonant description. The consonant component of the course rests on a mastery of airstream mechanisms (as ejectives, implosives and clicks are included),

[1] Two experiences of Flip in phonetics/phonology in the UK are those of Ashby (2011, 2013) (also see Setter, 2015). We were not aware of them when we first decided to embark on Flipped Phonetics.

voicing, nasality/orality, and place and manner of articulation. Secondary articulations are also covered. The vowel component covers monophthongs and diphthongs and focuses on height, backness and rounding as important aspects of vowel articulation. The Cardinal Vowel system is also introduced. In a nutshell, students are supposed to learn how to describe, transcribe and classify human speech sounds; skills that the course consolidates in various ways.

As to the resources used, students are urged to study the chapter on phonetics in Fromkin et al. (2011). In preparing the course itself, we relied on both dated and recent references (e.g.Abercrombie, 1967; Ashby, 2011; Ladefoged, 1975; Ladefoged and Johnson, 2011;Laver, 1994;Lodge, 2009;O'Connor, 1973;Ogden, 2009;Pike, 1943). Some relevant web resources were also consulted, which students are encouraged to use.[2]

Introduction to Phonetics is challenging both to the teacher and to the students. Our students mostly have a literary orientation background and are generally poor at scientific subjects. They opt for the literature stream, yet they find themselves head-on with science again, phonetics itself having a scientific aspect that they tend to naturally resent. Regarding the teachers, the content is difficult to teach, given the limited time of three-hour sessions at best. The teachers' and students' tasks are all the more difficult since phonetics is a basic component of the linguistics program, a poor understanding of which generally has a snowball effect (especially on phonology and morpho-phonology). Students also encounter phonetics for their very first time, a first encounter that is generally likely to be the last one in the curriculum.In later semesters of the undergraduate program and all semesters of the Linguistics Master's program, no phonetics is provided, except perhaps in short, timely, reviews.

Traditional approach

Our own experience in teaching phonetics can be divided into two periods, the latter consisting of two stages. At the beginning, ICT not yet being available, our approach was based on lecturing, using the blackboard as the only visual support. This "chalk and talk" approach was very tedious for both teacher and learners. The amount of information to be learnt was quite large, and absent helping visual supports, the students faced a formidable task.Later, we designed

[2]We advised our students to use websites that present basic phonetics (i) and more specialized phonetics (ii):

(i) http://cambridgeenglishonline.com/Phonetics_Focus
http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/ features/pronunciation

(ii) University of Iowa phonetics- http://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/
Interactive Sagittal Section- http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~danhall/phonetics/sammy-old.html
Newcastle University online resources for practical phonetics https://teaching.ncl.ac.uk/ipa/

print-handouts containing drawings collated from various sources. Also, the barebones of the lecture were provided so that students had only to add the details which were presented orally. The exercises themselves were on the handouts. This method saved some time for in-class activities and made class work less tedious.

When relevant web materials became available, especially with Web 2.0 technology, more print materials were available, as were sound files and videos. Our handouts were enriched by the addition of URLs to the relevant sections to encourage students to consult the websitesavailable. Benefit in class from what was available was not possible given the fact that classrooms were not yet equipped with projection and sound facilities.When the logistics permitted the use of ICT, we used videos in class. Still, the approach was not learner-centered.

A problem of a different nature came up. With the 2003 reform of Moroccan higher education, the undergraduate program shrank from four years to three, and students seemed to graduate with a very poor understanding of phonetics, and linguistics for that matter. After some reflective teaching, we decided to adopt a more engaging pedagogy that is learner-centered, Flip.

Flipped learning and DLR development

Flipped learning

Kim et al.'s (2014) survey of the literature stresses the fact that student-centered learning is challenging in that it pedagogically presupposes new roles and responsibilities teachers are not necessarily prepared for. One such challenge relates to the limited classroom time and number of contact sessions, which makes it difficult to strike the balance between delivering lectures and engaging students actively in learning. One pedagogy proposed to cater to such needs is Flip[3].

"Flipped Learning is a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter" (Flipped Learning Network, 2014). FLIP is used acronymically and mnemonically to present the four pillars of the pedagogy: (i) Flexible environments (the learning space is physically rearranged and students choose when/where they learn); (ii) Learning culture (Flip is a learner-centered model enabling students to actively construct knowledge); (iii) Intentional content (give priority to concepts used in direct instruction;

[3]Flip pedagogy is supported by academic institutions, e.g. Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation, University of Queensland Australia or the University of Utah's Teaching Flipped- 3module.

create/curate relevant content (videos...); differentiate content); (iv) Professional educators (who observe, provide feedback, reflect and collaborate with others, and become less visible). Flip has advantages: students have more accessibility to video lectures, class time is devoted to application of concepts, and the instructor has a better opportunity to spot errors in thinking. Flip also has disadvantages: it requires careful preparation; the video lectures need more time and effort and require new skills; video lectures may lead to absenteeism, compromising the whole flip pedagogy; and there may be poor access to technology or lack of it.

In their study, Kim et al. (2014) point out a serious limitation in previous studies of Flip, limiting the design to replacing in-class instruction with video lectures and devoting class time for homework. For a more viable Flip pedagogy, the authors propose nine design principles, the first three of which come from Brame (2013):"(i) an opportunity for students to gain first exposure prior to class... (ii) an incentive for students to prepare for class... (iii) a mechanism to assess student understanding... (iv) clear connections between in-class and out-of-class activities... (v) clearly defined and well-structured guidance... (vi) enough time for students to carry out the assignments... (vii) facilitation for building a learning community... (viii) prompt/adaptive feedback on individual or group works...(ix) technologies familiar and easy to access."

As far as assessment is concerned, using Flip may involve challenges. Bergman and Sams (2012) suggest a combination of formative assessment, based on the evaluation of the learners as they learn in the Flip environment, as well as summative assessment, the more standard practice among teachers. Flip provides an opportunity for individualized efficient assessment as teachers interact with the learners and know whether they are learning.[4]

DLRs: Design and quality criteria

In their attempt at defining digital resources for teaching and learning, Blake et al. (2003:5) say: "'Digital resources' is a broad term: it can include electronic books, online journals, movies, reference texts such as dictionaries as well as audio or image files; it is used to cover material created digitally or by scanning analogue resources." According to the *Senter For IKT I Utdanningen* (nd:3), "the term "digital learning resources" is used in different ways and no generally agreed definition has been established." In their 2004-2008 *Programme for Digital Competence (Program for digital kompetanse*), DLRsare described as "educational tools that can be used for teaching and learning purposes and that use ICT in order to promote learning via products, services and processes. Such resources may be linked with various media and forms of learning."

[4] In our experience, we adopted the same methods of assessment as the other teachers involved in teaching the same course, both in the formative and summative assessments.

The design of DLRs, and that of any instructional program or material, is generally underlain by an instructional design model/models (see for instance Parhar, 2003; Raferty, 2011). By carefully and systematically planning it, the DLR stands more chances of being an effective instructional object. In Parhar's (2003:28) words, "in simple words, instructional design is a pedagogic or teaching device that makes instruction as well as the instructional material more engaging, effective and efficient."

Instructional design is informed by learning theories (Parhar, 2003; Dede, 2008). Citing Ertmer and Newby (1993), Parhar (2003:30-31) emphasizes the fact that designers keep not one single theory in mind but use an amalgamation of the available theories in that the

- behavioral approach can effectively facilitate mastery of the content
- cognitive strategies are useful in teaching problem-solving tactics and
- constructivist strategies are suited for dealing with ill-identified problems

Parhar concludes that whatever the design theory, the components remain the same: identification and analysis of the instructional objectives, the planning and design of solutions, the implementation of the solutions and the evaluation and revision of the instructional object.

The model used in designing instructional objects in our experience is ADDIE, an acronym for the five steps involved: (i) analysis, (ii) design, (iii) development, (iv) implementation and (v) evaluation (Molenda, 2003; Piskurich, 2006; Shelton and Saltsman, 2011). First, audience, course content/objectives, and the medium used, for instance, are analyzed. Second, the DLR is designed, generally following a detailed scriptor storyboard.[5] Third, the learning object, the DLR itself, is developed. Once ready, the DLR is released in the fourth stage, the implementation phase. The last stage consists of both formative and summative assessment of the DLR.

In creating DLRs, three quality criteria are observed: pedagogical, ergonomic, and intellectual property criteria. The intellectual property criterion is self-explanatory. Regarding the remaining two criteria, Sharma (2003) very

[5]The basic building block for the development of teaching-learning resources, the storyboard is a sequence of simply elaborated visuals depicting the resource and involves several components: (i) the rationale behind the idea, (ii) a brief title, target audience, objectives, and content outline, (iii) research on the relevant graphics, (iv) identification and selection of content elements coupled with the best way to deliver the content, (v) interface design and layout, and (vi) preparation of a detailed storyboard (Mishra, 2003).

broadly identifies content (or conceptual) and technology (presentation and design) levels of evaluation and highlights four basic issues: (i) educational effectiveness (the resource should be of a high academic and pedagogic value, meeting educational objectives,offering good presentations, and providing higher-order thinking skills); (ii) the entertainment value of the resource (i.e. providing 'edutainment' for the learner and creating a "fun-learn environment"); (iii) user-friendliness; and (iv) the design features of the resource (mainly the ergonomy of its page-layout and the quality and characteristics of sound and video offered).

Flipped phonetics[6]

Assistive technology

We now describe our phonetics screencasting experience. Since what matters is not so much to produce very high-quality videos as it is to develop a DLR which is efficient and reusable, the cost was restricted to a minimum by using readily available and/or open source programs. The approach adopted in developing our DLRs is very simple: we designed and developed screencasts of slide presentations to which we added audio narration.

A digression into screencasting is in order at this point. Educause (2006) defines a screencast as:

> *a screen capture of the actions on a user's computer screen, typically with accompanying audio... a screencast captures what happens on a monitor over a period of time. The audio track can be the sound from an application being demonstrated, a narrative from the presenter, or background audio from another application.*

Raferty (2011:666) identifies four steps in screencast creation (preparation, capture, production and publication) and comments that creating screencasts is demanding in terms of time, pedagogy and technology. Comparing screencasting (or vodcasting) to podcasting (see Alliotta et al., 2008; Edrisingha et al., 2008; Salmon et al., 2008), Winterbottom (2007:6) notes that

> *Screencasting has significant advantages over audio recordings in that the presentations can include diagrams, photographs and videos. This is an important consideration for visually rich subject*

[6]The rationale is partly presented in §2. Linguistics students find Phonetics difficult to learn and consequently resent it, to the detriment of their learning experience in other components like phonology and morphology. Flip is meant to save class time for a more hands-on learning experience. Also, Flip would allow us to experiment with a more engaging pedagogy that integrates ICT. From a reflective teaching perspective, adopting Flip would be an enrichment of our experience and a contribution to Higher Education pedagogy in Morocco.

> *areas... where visual aids are often highly important for the understanding of much of the subject material.*

Screencasts offer several advantages provided they are carefully integrated into the pedagogy. They create a sense of engagement between faculty and students and can be used to support students' active engagement with the learning materials (Educause, 2006). Combining visual and audio channels, screencasts are also useful in demonstrations of basic concepts and software tutorials, for example. Screencasts also provide a more flexible environment, with students enjoying more independence and having more control over their learning pace (Educause, 2006; Raferty, 2011; Winterbottom, 2007). Designers have to be aware of the learners' individual differences and preferences for different ways of engaging with the material, thus offering differentiated learning as far as possible. Screencasts save lecture time, which leaves considerably more class time to hands-on education (Raferty, 2011; Winterbottom, 2007).

However, screencasts come with a few downsides, too. Developing screencasts requires a thoughtful design. Besides being "*pedagogically led* rather than *technology led*", screencasts should have a specific, clear purpose (ideally one learning outcome) and should not be long (ideally less than ten minutes) (Raferty, 2011:666). Also, if screencasts are to be integrated, their design has to counterweigh their inherent teacher-centeredness and passivity effect they create on students (Educause, 2006; Raferty, 2011), for example by involving students in tasks, thinking and problem-solving.[7] From another perspective, screencasts are not supposed to replace face-to-face teaching, but rather to provide additional material to free-up time for more discussion or practical-based teaching/learning (Winterbottom, 2007). Another downside of screencasting is absenteeism. Traphagan et al. (2010) do in fact note that the use of screencasts (webcasts) does have a negative impact on student attendance. However, students' access to screencasts appeared to reverse the negative effects of absenteeism, in that more screencast viewing correlated with higher performance. The authors conclude that the results indicate overall that, although detrimental to student attendance, screencasts could have positive effects on their learning experiences and performance.

We now turn to our experience. Our starting point was class PowerPoint presentations we had delivered in the past. After making sure that the content we wanted to deliver was adequate, we split it over five presentations to ensure that the content was at the same time unified and not overwhelming to the students. Given that phonetics content is better delivered using graphics, we included as many as necessary. We relied mostly on Paint to enhance the

[7]Raferty (2011) notes that screencasts are 'teacher-focused' rather than 'student-focused' and can lack interactivity, and hence encourage student passivity. The author suggests including quizzes, multiple choice questions, drag and drop activitiesfor more student engagement with the screencasts.

graphics, which were hand reproductions of the vocal tract. Also, some of the slides contained basic animation for a better visualization of the actions of certain vocal organs. One such example is a slide depicting tongue movement to illustrate the three different levels of aperture in stops, fricatives and approximants; the visual effect achieved is the successive movement of the tongue downwards and upwards. The design of all the slide presentations was unified. Once the slide presentations were ready, we used the free version of Screencast-O-Matic to turn them into videos. The guiding principle was to develop videos that were four to five minutes long. One video was slightly longer, around ten minutes, with the trade-off being slightly longer duration for thematic unity.The end product was five videos posted on YouTube for easy access by the students (see Appendix A).[8]

Pedagogical scenario

Underlying any pedagogical activity is prior planning. The lesson plan is probably the most common type, regardless of whether ICT is integrated or not (Earp and Pozzi, 2006:35). The evolution of the field of educational technology has led to the evolution of the concept of pedagogical planning, with the educational multimedia resources available affecting both the form and substance of lesson planning. This evolution has brought along challenges in how to effectively integrate those resources in the teaching practice to achieve the desired goals.

The concept of 'pedagogical scenario' (also called the learning scenario) comes as a natural evolution:

> *a social setting dedicated to learning, education or training. It is a process of interaction between people in a specific learning situation using resources for learning within a designed environment. People in role of learners perform activities directed towards learning objectives using resources for learning. Learners may work on their own or in a group of learners. They may be supported by teaching staff.* (Klebl, 2006: 226; cited in Maina, 2010:13)

Earp and Pozzi (2006:40) cite Pernin and Lejeune's (2006) definition of the pedagogical scenario as:[9]

[8]Another possibility to share the videos with students is through flash drives, CDs or DVDs. In our case, another possibility yet was to integrate the videos in a CD-ROM, along with other interactive activities for a variety of multimedia and more student engagement. Unfortunately, the CD-ROM project was not finalized before the experience.

[9]The authors further subdivide pedagogical scenarios into full and elementary scenarios. The latter contain basic ideas to be subsequently developed into full scenarios.

> *the description, carried out a priori or a posteriori, of the playing out of a learning situationor a unit of learning aimed at the acquisition of a precise body of knowledge through thespecification of roles and activities, as well as knowledge handling, resources, tools,services and results associated with the implementation of the activities. This broaddefinition covers diverse circumstances: for example it could apply to a traditional or computerized learning situation or to a UoL [unit of learning] lasting just a few seconds or a course spanninga number of years.*

It is in this sense that integration is understood. It is not enough to use DLRs in class; rather these should be underlain by a pedagogical scenario detailing their outcomes.For a sample of our pedagogical scenarios- see appendix B.

5. First evaluation of 'flipped phonetics'

Our summative assessment, which is the focus of this section, is based on 70 student questionnaires distributed during a class session and collected immediately they had been filled.[10] The student population comprised 45 new students and 21 repeaters (4 students abstained from saying whether they are repeaters.) As to gender, there were 19 male and 47 female students (4 students did not indicate their gender). The age of the students ranged from 19 to 26, as detailed in table 1.

Table 1.

Age	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	No ans.
Number	7	24	11	9	2	6	1	3	7

Pre-class video watching

Before the beginning of the experience, none of the students reported difficulty accessing the videos. In the questionnaire, we checked whether the students did watch the videos before coming to class, and if not why. 48 students managed to do so in contrast to 17 students who didn't (5 students did not answer). Two students provided no justificationfor not watching the videos.

[10]Our first overall evaluation of the experience is both formative and summative. The formative assessment was done as the Flip experience unfolded, and we spotted certain difficulties in the implementation of the pedagogy, like the large number of students, classroom logistics, and some technical problems with the DLRs.

The justifications themselves ranged from a simple 'didn't have the opportunity to watch' or 'an unexpected problem' to 'didn't have access to the internet' or 'don't own a computer'. Similar justifications included 'not enough money to go to cyber café', 'broken tablet and bad quality laptop', and 'connection error'. Quite unexpected answers were 'struggling with Semester 6', 'laziness', or sheer 'didn't know about them'/ 'didn't notice they were posted'.[11] Concerning the comments on the method of teaching, there were 51 answers as opposed to 19 no answers. There were both positive comments (36 students) and negative ones (15 students). Some suggestions for improving the flipped method were also made. The positive comments included: 'includes students, interactive, useful', 'modern'/ 'quite new'/ 'innovative and well prepared', '(very) good'/ 'good enough'/ 'fair enough'/ 'fine', 'not bad', 'liked', 'high level', 'organized', 'efforts very appreciated', 'better than other teaching methods', 'effective and helpful', 'useful', and 'crucial asset', and 'makes things easy to understand'.

Negative comments included 'hard a little bit'/ 'a little bit complicated'/ 'needs to be simplified'/ 'needs to be more explicit'/ 'needs more clarification' and 'takes a lot of time'. Some students complained that DLRs contained 'too much information' or were 'rather rapid/unclear'. Others yet complained that 'collaboration=doing nothing' and that there was 'too much noise'. Others simply 'didn't like it (at all)'. There were also suggestions for improvement made by students who made positive comments. These included 'still needs improvement', 'needs to be simplified', 'a bit fast', 'time needed', 'crowdedness', 'more practice', 'noise', and 'detailed content'.

Does Flip ease difficulty?

Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1= very easy; 5= very difficult) the content and the skills involved in the course.The students' answers are provided in tables 2 and 3, respectively:

Table 2.

How difficult is the content of the phonetics course?

	1		2		3		4		5		No ans.	
Pulmonic airstream	22	31.4 %	9	12.8 %	20	28.5 %	10	12.8 %	9	12.8 %	2	0.2 %
Glottalic airstream	17	24.2 %	16	22.8 %	23	32.8 %	11	15.7 %	10	12.8 %	2	0.2 %
Velaric airstream	7	10%	13	18.5 %	23	32.8 %	11	15.7 %	8	11.4 %	5	0.7 %
Organs of speech	2	31.4	1	24.2	1	12.8	1	17.1	7	10%	3	0.4

[11]While the 'didn't know about them'comment could be a mere excuse, it may also be completely true given the rate of absenteeism in some Moroccan universities.

	2	%	7	%	0	%	2	%				%
Consonants	15	21.4 %	21	30%	17	24.2 %	13	18.5 %	11	15.7 %	-	
Vowels	14	20%	13	18.5 %	22	31.4 %	10	12.8 %	12	17.1 %	2	0.2 %

Table 3.

How difficult are the skills related to the phonetics course?

	1		2		3		4		5		No ans.	
Description	5	0.7%	16	22.8%	17	24.2%	17	24.2%	11	15.7%	2	0.2%
Transcription	6	0.8%	19	27.1	17	24.2%	12	17.1%	10	12.8%	3	0.4%
Classification	8	11.4%	13	18.5%	14	20%	18	25.7	11	15.7%	3	0.4%

The ratio of students who found the least difficulty in content ranges from 10% to 31.4%. The highest scores represent pulmonic airstream and the organs of speech, by far the most straightforward components content-wise. If we put the scores for values 4 and 5 together, these range from 25.6% (pulmonic airstream) to 34.2% (consonants). Concerning skills, the figures are lower-0.7% (description) and 0.8% (classification), and 11.4% (classification)-revealing that the majority of students face difficulties. If we put the scores for values 4 and 5 together in an ascending order of difficulty, these correspond to29.9% (transcription), 39.9% (description),and 41.4%(classification).

Two questions targeted the students' opinions concerning Flip. Students were asked to use values 1 (=not at all) to 5 (=a lot).The first question was related to the videos themselves, and specifically whether they helped make easier various aspects related to the phonetics content and the skills. The students' answers are presented in table 4:

Table 4.

To what extent have the videos made the following aspectsof the course easy to learn?

	1		2		3		4		5		No ans.	
Pulmonic airstream	7	10%	12	17.1%	16	22.8%	15	21.4%	17	24.2%	3	0.4%
Glottalic airstream	9	12.8%	13	18.5%	19	27.1%	14	20%	11	15.7%	4	0.5%
Velaric airstream	7	10%	17	24.2%	16	22.8%	12	17.1%	13	18.5%	5	0.7%
Organs of speech	4	0.5%	7	10%	13	18.5%	18	25.7%	26	37.1%	3	0.4%
Consonants	3	0.4%	11	15.7%	19	27.1%	17	24.2%	17	24.2%	2	0.2%
Vowels	7	10%	9	12.8%	15	21.4%	15	21.4%	19	27.1%	4	0.5%
Description	8	11.4%	13	18.5%	16	22.8%	12	17.1%	17	24.2%	3	0.4%
Transcription	7	10%	12	17.1%	21	30%	12	17.1%	15	21.4%	5	0.7%
Classification	6	0.8%	9	12.8%	19	27.1%	20	28.5%	13	18.5%	4	0.5%

0.4% to 12.8% of the students consider the videos to be of no help at all. Putting the scores for values 4 and 5 together shows that the range is from 35.6% to 55.6% for airstream mechanisms, 48.4% to 62.8% for organs of speech and types of sounds, and 38.5% to 47% for skills.

The second question targeted the in-class activities and whether they helped with the various aspects of the course. The students' answers are presented in table 5:

Table 5.

To what extent have the in-class activities made the following aspectsof the course easy to learn?

	1		2		3		4		5		No ans.	
Pulmonic airstream	8	11.4%	12	17.1%	21	30%	14	20%	13	18.5%	3	0.4%
Glottalic airstream	5	0.7%	14	20%	22	31.4%	17	24.2%	10	14.2%	2	0.2%
Velaric airstream	5	0.7%	15	21.4%	23	21.4%	12	17.1%	12	17.1%	5	0.7%
Organs of speech	7	10%	11	15.7%	13	18.5%	14	20%	23	32.8%	2	0.2%
Consonants	5	0.7%	8	11.4%	20	28.5%	23	32.8%	14	20%	3	0.4%
Vowels	5	0.7%	7	10%	18	25.7%	21	30%	17	24.2%	3	0.4%
Description	5	0.7%	12	17.1%	21	30%	15	21.4%	17	24.2%	4	0.5%
Transcription	6	0.8%	14	20%	18	25.7%	14	20%	15	21.4%	4	0.5%
Classification	8	11.4%	7	10%	18	25.7%	17	24.2%	15	21.4%	4	0.5%

The ratio of students considering the in-class activitiesof no help at all ranges from 0.7% to 11.4%. Putting the scores for values 4 and 5 together shows that the range is from 34.2% to 38.5% for airstream mechanisms, 52.8% to 54.2% for organs of speech and sound types, and 41.4% to 45.6% for skills. Comparison of the figures in Table 6 shows that video watching is considered more helpful in pulmonic (and to a lesser extent in velaric) airstream mechanism and organs of speech. In-class activities are more helpful regarding glottalic airstream, consonants, vowels and all the skills.

Table 6.

Comparison of scores for videos and in-class activities (values 4 and 5 only)

	Pulmo.	Glot.	Velar.	Organs	Cons.	Vowel	Descr.	Trans.	Class.
Videos	55.6%	35.7%	35.6%	62.8%	48.4%	48.5%	41.3%	38.5%	41.4%
Class act.	38.5%	38.5%	34.2%	52.8%	52.8%	54.2%	45.6%	47%	45.6%

Conclusion

We adopted "Flipped Phonetics" as an innovative method to teach Semester 4 introductory phonetics, expecting Flipand ICT integration to yield better learning results. The method is very challenging and requires the teacher to be a subject-matter expert, master Flip pedagogy, and be conversant with the basics of developing DLRs. While the first requirement is generally satisfied by teachers, the latter two are not, calling for teacher training/education. Our first informal evaluation of Flip revealed that less than 13% of the students found the videos and the in-class activities of no help at all while 34% to 62% of them assigned values 4 and 5 to the usefulness of the videos and in-class activities. We take this as evidence for the relative success of the Flip experience, hoping to carry out a more systematic, in-depth study in the future. Just as interesting would be a comparison with other methods of teaching and an extension of Flip to teaching the other components, i.e. phonology, morphology and syntax.

Mohammed V University in Rabat

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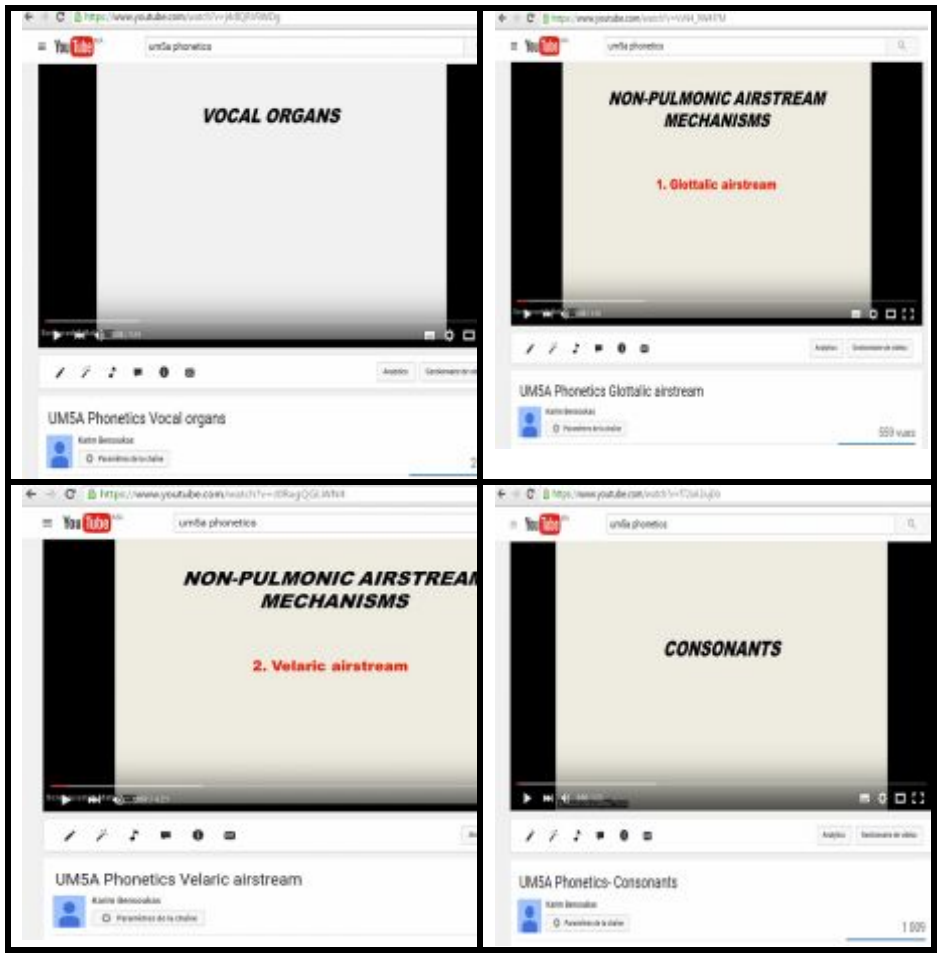
Appendices:

Appendix A- *UM5A Phonetics on YouTube-Total watching time: ≈30 minutes*

Vocal organs	9:40
Glottalic Airstream	4:41
Velaric Airstream	4:22
Consonants	5:23
Vowels	5:00



Appendix B- *Pedagogical scenario- Vocal organs and basics of transcription, description and classification.*

Name	Karim Bensoukas		
Date	----------		
Level	Semester 4		
Course	*Initiation to Core Linguistics*	*Phonetics*	*Vocal organs*
Objectives & goals	• Know vocal organs involved in speech sound articulation (description) • The role of each vocal organ in speech sound articulation	Pedagogy of "Flipped Learning": Learners are supposed to have watched the video lecture before the face-to-face class session. The session is then centered partially or totally on the learner. Learning becomes active either through individual or group, collaborative work.	
Anticipatory set	Short additional videos: • The lungs' work in the two respiratory phases (focus on rib cage swinging, action of the diaphragm...) • Vocal cords in action • Tongue action *Time*: 10-15 minutes	Learners team up as groups of 5-6 members and designate a moderator, a note-taker, and a spokesperson. Learners watch the videos, discuss their content and draft an informal descriptive summary. The spokesperson of each group stands up and reads the report to the whole class. The note-takers of the other groups make notes. Afterwards, the members of each group re-discuss their summary and redraft it. A general discussion and synthesis follows. The instructor plays the "guide on the side", going around, checking with each individual group and making comments on any misconceptions, difficulties….	
Direct instruction	• Preview/review of video lectures • Discussion of difficult concepts	Learners team up as groups of 5-6 members for a general discussion of the content of the video. Instructor elicits the maximum contributions/reactions from learners. The	

	Time: 10-15 minutes	instructor's emphasis is on misconceptions and problematic areas for more direct lecturing and just-in-time teaching. Instructor also elicits learners' evaluation of the video, in terms of content, clarity, technical aspects … for a formative evaluation of the DLR. Notes are made by instructor for future improvements.
Guided practice	• Exercises on vocal organs • Exercises on voicing • Transcription exercises, Classification } Using IPA charts • Description ex. *Time*: 60-80 minutes	Learners team up as groups of 5-6 members and designate a moderator, a note-taker and spokesperson. Learners deal with one exercise at a time, discuss it and write their answer. The spokesperson reads the report to the class. The other note-takers make notes. Afterwards, the members of each group discuss the other groups' answers, focusing on how different from theirs, while at the same time trying to decide on the right answer and justify it. The same strategy is adopted with the other exercises. The instructor's role is that of the "guide on the side".
Closure	• Synthesis • Stressing relationship between vocal organs and description and classification(and transcription) *Time*: 5-10 minutes	Learners try to make a synthesis of the course content. There are two options: (i) individual work or (ii) group work. Time-permitting, each group's synthesis is discussed; otherwise, some syntheses are chosen randomly and discussed.
Independent practice	• Watching video lecture again (decide on difficult aspects) • More practice exercises • Practice related to exam format (esp. writing paragraphs) • Preliminary exploration of the suggested websites • Watching next video	Learners watch the video again depending on individual needs. Learners do more practice, preferably interactive exercises, and also explore the suggested websites. Learners prepare for upcoming class session by watching the next video lecture. Learners may choose to work alone or with others if they wish.
Required materials & equipment	• Video lecture (Posted on YouTube, later on CD-ROM) • Videos to be used in class (lungs, vocal cords, and tongue; available from the internet) • PowerPoint presentation – Concepts – Exercises	
Assessment & follow-up	• Describe methods for determining whether or not the objectives were met. • Provide follow-up measures to address shortcomings.	

A Comparison of Blended and Face-to-face Approaches to Teaching "Research Methods" to Undergraduate Students

MOHAMED YEOU[·]

Abstract

The article reports a quasi-experimental study on the impact of a blended e-learning approach on students' performance outcomes in a "Research Methods" course at a Moroccan university. An experimental group of 40 students used a Moodle LMS-supported course to access all the instruction materials (readings, lecture notes and quizzes) as well as face-to-face (F2F) communication in class. The control group of 48 students received only F2F course delivery for the same course content. The two groups were compared on the variable of final course grade. Results indicate that the experimental group had slightly higher means, though these were not statistically significant. Differences in student performance across the two settings might rather be accounted for by GPA (average of Semester 3 and 4 grades). Analysis of students' log data for the experimental group was also conducted to identify any correlations between online activity (total time online, number of online sessions and number of total views) and final course grade for this group. A stepwise multivariate regression revealed that only two variables − number of online sessions and GPA − were significantly associated with final student grade. The present study demonstrates that blended learning is as useful and as effective as F2F learning. Online components in a blended course should be designed in such a manner as to provide new materials on a weekly basis rather than all at once at the beginning of the course.

Keywords: blended learning, online education, LMS, e-learning, Moodle

Introduction

The use of internet-based information and communication technologies is increasing rapidly in higher education. In particular, blended learning, which combines face-to-face (F2F) instruction with online instruction has been very popular (Graham, 2006, 2013). Blended learning offers the flexibility of self-directed learning and the opportunity to include varied and different

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instructional materials in an innovative way. It is commonly assumed that the implementation of blended learning in a course favours a learner-centred approach and improves learning outcomes (Graham & Robinson, 2007).

Great efforts have been made by the Moroccan government to introduce web-based learning systems into higher education by the implementation of projects such as the Moroccan Virtual Campus, which aims at promoting and supporting e-learning in Moroccan public universities. In spite of such great efforts, the offer of blended or fully online courses is still very limited in Moroccan higher education. Not surprisingly, little research has been done to empirically understand how Moroccan students perceive and react to web-based learning systems (Bouroumi & Fajr, 2014; Diouny & Othmani, 2012, Laaboudi & Erguig, this volume; Mchichi & Afdel, 2012; Yeou, 2016a) and how their performance compares across different instruction modes: online vs blended vs face-to-face (Yeou, 2016b).

The published literature on the efficacy of online learning in general and blended learning in particular is expansive and polarised. Many studies have shown that student performance is comparable or even better in an online course setting compared to a face-to-face setting (Russel, 1999; Spanjers et al., 2015; Urtel, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The empirical evidence discussed in the literature revolves around two main aspects: (1) a comparison of online or blended course delivery formats with F2F formats (Kavadella, Tsiklakis, Vougiouklakis, & Lionarakis, 2012; Yang, 2012; Yapici & Akbayin, 2012) and (2) an investigation of how measurements of students' online participation correlate with variations in their academic performance (Al-Jarf, 2004; Damianov et al., 2009; Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, & Thompson, 2012; Korkofingas & Macri, 2013). Unfortunately, many studies within this literature suffer from a number of shortcomings, such as the use of non-objective measures of effectiveness and engagement; using participants who differ by age, gender and academic background; and comparing courses that differ in learning materials, instructors and methods of assessment.

Consequently, investigating the effectiveness of blended learning remains highly important. What is especially missing is empirical research that compares blended with traditional face-to-face course environments in the field of research methods.

The present study attempts to avoid the afore-mentioned weaknesses by using a quasi-experimental design that compares student performance outcomes in a blended versus F2F course settings. The two formats of the course were delivered by the same instructor, using approximately the same learning materials and methods of evaluation.

This study seeks to address the following two questions:

(a) Is there a significant difference between blended and F2F course delivery modes on students' performance outcomes in a research methods course?

(b) Do the various measures of online participation and engagement have comparable impact on student outcomes in a research methods course?

The article is structured as follows. First, we provide a review of the literature on the effectiveness of blended learning. Then we propose the hypotheses and the research methodology. Thereafter, the results of the collected data and the evaluation of the hypotheses are reported. Finally, the results and implications are discussed, and limitations along with future lines of investigation are identified.

Review of the literature

The published literature on the effectiveness of online learning in general and blended learning in particular is expansive and mixed. Hundreds of comparative primary studies and sixteen major meta-analyses have investigated the differences between online vs blended vs face-to-face methods of instructional delivery (e.g. Bernard, Borokhovski, Schmid, Tamim, & Abrami, 2014; Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013; Russel, 1999; Spanjers et al., 2015; Urtel, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

There is a general consensus on the efficacy of online learning compared with F2F learning. The average effect size reported in the literature ranges from d= 0.05 to 0.15 for online learning (Bernard et al., 2014). The effect size is even larger when blended rather than purely online mode of instruction was compared with F2F mode. The average effect size is significantly in the small to medium range g= 0.27–0.35 (Means et al., 2013; Spanjers et al., 2015; Tamim, Bernard, Borokhovski, Abrami, & Schmid, 2011).

The empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of blended learning is based on a comparison of students' learning outcomes in two sections of the course: blended vs traditional F2F. For example, Kavadella et al. (2012) examined the relative performance of students in blended vs face-to-face teaching in an oral radiology course and found that the cohort of students in the blended section outperformed the traditional cohort. Yang (2012) reported that blended learning was significantly effective in enhancing college students' reading proficiency as revealed by the post-test scores. Lim et al. (2008) compared student performance and satisfaction levels between three delivery methods (online, blended and F2F) in an undergraduate Wellness course. They found that students in the online learning group and in the blended learning

group had significant higher levels of achievement than students in the traditional learning group. Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004), in their study comparing blended courses with fully online and F2F courses, reported that the blended setting was comparable to or – in some cases – better than F2F in terms of student grade. Similarly, Chandra and Lloyd (2008) found that students' outcomes in physics were more enhanced in blended instructional format than F2F format.

Other studies, however, have reported comparable grades across blended and traditional F2F modes of instruction: for Introductory Programming (Cakiroglu, 2012); for Computer Networks and Communications (Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2007); for Human Behaviour in the Social Environment (Forte & Root, 2011); and for Introductory Statistics (Utts, Sommer, Acredolo, Maher, & Mathews, 2003)

The somewhat contradictory findings in the literature with reports of both equal and superior learning outcomes for blended learning vs F2F learning can be explained by the presence of a number of methodological weaknesses (Driscoll et al., 2012 ; Ungerleider & Bums, 2003). Among these weaknesses we can cite the following: lack of demographic control, small sample size, lack of random assignment of students, unequal size for the experimental group and the control group and comparing courses that differ in materials, instructor and assessment.

Hypotheses

The present study contributes to the literature by providing further empirical evidence on the effectiveness of blended learning for an undergraduate course - Research Methods. The study investigates whether student performance differs across blended and F2F classroom settings. Drawing from the findings reported in the literature above, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There will be a significant difference between blended and F2F course delivery methods on learning outcomes.

H2: Online participation in a blended course setting will have an influence on performance outcomes.

Methodology

Participants and study context

Data obtained for this study was drawn from an introductory research methods course that was taught over two different semesters (fall 2013, 2015). The course was delivered as a blended section in 2013 and as an F2F section in 2015. A total of 86 students participated in this study. They were primarily 3rd

year university students with a gender balance of females to male of 49:39. The students studied at a department of English in a Moroccan university and all of them are Moroccan nationals and native speakers of Arabic. Their median age was 22 years, and the range was 21-23. Within the blended section of the course, there were 40 students who used a Moodle LMS-supported course to access all the instruction materials (readings, lecture notes and self-test quizzes) as well as face-to-face (F2F) communication in class. This was the experimental group. The control group consisted of 48 students who received only F2F instruction for the same course content and materials and with the same teacher. Assessments of both sections were administered in class using an identical final written exam including multiple choice questions and short open questions.

Allocation, i.e. assigning students to either the experimental or control condition was not based on random choice of students but on semester class grouping. Hence, the study employs a quasi-experimental research design. The study qualifies as a quasi-experimental experiment because it was not possible to randomly assign and match students to the two study conditions.

The course under study, *Research Methods*, is a general introduction to the principles of research methods for students majoring in linguistics or literature. All sections of the course were taught over a 16-week semester with a 3-hour class meeting. The F2F section of the course followed a standard face-to-face format with the course pack and lectures being the primary mode of providing content to students. The blended section, which was a combination of the face-to-face format and online format, used online teaching materials instead of the course pack: the readings, lecture notes and self-testing question banks were available online via Moodle.

Student characteristics such as GPA (grade point average) and gender were obtained from the student-data system provided by the administration. GPA as a broad measure of students' general academic aptitude and motivation was calculated for the preceding semesters (Semester 3 and Semester 4).

Data collection for the Blended section of the course

The Moodle reporting feature was used to collect data about student online course activity for the blended section of the course. Moodle recorded the date and time every student accessed each file in an MS Excel file. A single spreadsheet was created from this log file and filtered to obtain for each student a number of online components that measure his or her online participation: total time spent online on course content, total number of online sessions and total number of hits for each activity or resource (html pages, pdf and ppt files and external URLs). The data spreadsheet was joined with final exam grade and GPA for each student.

Variables

The dependent and independent variables used in the present study are given below:

(a) Dependent variable:

The main dependent variable considered in this study is students' grade, which measures their performance outcomes.

- *Grade*: Student final exam grade (represented as a numerical score out of 20)

(b) Independent variables:

- *Use or non-use of Blended learning (in the context of Moodle).* This independent variable differentiates the experimental group from the control group (Hypothesis 1).
- *GPA:* Student grade point average for all university courses taken in Semesters 3 and 4 (represented as a numerical score out of 20)**.** GPA was included as it might probably function as a potential confounding variable.

The remaining predictor variables given below were used as measurements of student online participation or engagement (Hypothesis 2):

- *Total_Time*: Total time in minutes spent on each online activity related to the course.
- *Nb_Session*: Total number of unique log-on sessions.
- *Nb_View:* Total number of resources viewed (html pages, pdf and ppt files and external URLs).

Statistical treatment

The study employed both descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS version 20.0. Descriptive statistics included the calculations of the means, the standard deviations and the correlations of the variables. The inferential analysis consisted of stepwise multivariate regression, with a level of significance of .05. This method combines forward selection and backward elimination. Variables are entered in sequence in the regression and if they contribute to the model they are retained, otherwise they are excluded.

Exploratory descriptive analysis of the data was undertaken prior to the regression analysis. As the number of subjects was less than 50, the variable student grade was tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk Test. The test

($p > .05$) showed that grade values were normally distributed. Statistical methods such as the median, inter-quartile ranges multiples were used to identify any potential outliers for each variable. Two outliers were found and the corresponding entire observation was removed from the dataset. This reduced the workable sample from 88 to 86 students. Correlation analysis and scatterplots were also used to identify any potential collinearity.

Results and discussion

Statistical analysis for Hypothesis 1

Table 1 contains the results for the first hypothesis that there will be a significant difference between blended and F2F course delivery methods on learning outcomes. The table gives the means of students' Final Grade and GPA across the two methods of instruction. Mean comparisons of the variables show that students in the blended section of the course had higher grades and GPAs. The two groups were statistically compared on the two variables (Grade & GPA); the Independent t-test was used. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups on Final Grade. i.e. the use of blended learning may have enhanced the performance of the experimental group, sufficient to match that of the control group ($t(84)=0.90$; $p=0.37$). However, the fact that the two groups differed significantly with regard to GPA ($t(84)=3.350$; $p < 0.01$) indicates a potential selection effect that may account for the observed small difference in student performance between the two sections of the course.

Table 1

Descriptive summary statistics

	Delivery method	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grade	Traditional	48	11.0979	3.57488	.51599
	Blended	38	11.7500	3.04859	.49455
GPA	Traditional	48	10.5740	1.92641	.27805
	Blended	38	11.7124	1.18381	.19204

Using stepwise regression, SPSS output in Table2 show that the variable GPA was entered first in the regression analysis and was the only predictor that had a significant association with student final grade and may have accounted for 37.7% of the variance. Course delivery method was excluded as a variable as it is not significant.

Table 2

Model Summary for stepwise regression[a]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.615[a]	.379	.371	2.65579

a. Predictors: (Constant), GPA

The ANOVA test of significance shown in Table 3a reveals that the regression model was significant (F= 52.539) at the .0001 level. The coefficients for the regression model and their standard errors are given in Table 3b. From the values of the regression coefficients, the predicted value of student exam grade can be calculated as follows: Exam grade = -1.827 + 1.193 * GPA. The coefficient values indicate that for every additional one-point increase in GPA we can expect the exam grade to increase by an average of 1.193.

Table 3a

SPSS ANOVA output[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	361.073	1	361.073	51.193	.000[b]
	Residual	592.470	84	7.053		
	Total	953.543	85			

a. Dependent Variable: grade
b. Predictors: (Constant), GPA

Table 3b

Regression Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-1.827	1.869		-.978	.331
	GPA	1.193	.167	.615	7.155	.000

a. Dependent Variable: grade

Overall, the regression results do not support the first hypothesis as course delivery mode was not a significant predictor of student performance. GPA was

the only independent variable that was included in the model, suggesting that students with higher GPAs tend to perform significantly better on Final exam.

The critical importance of GPA is not surprising. In fact, previous research has already shown that GPA is a strong predictor of performance outcomes in online as well as in blended courses (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2015; Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Zacharis, 2015; Xu & Jaggars, 2013)

Regression analysis for Hypothesis 2

Table 4 gives the results for the second hypothesis that online participation in a blended course setting will have an influence on performance outcomes. Stepwise regression model summary of the independent variables on student course grade shows that the variable Number of online sessions was entered first in the regression analysis and was the best predictor, explaining 38.9% of the variation on final exam grade (R square for Model 2 in Table 4). The second variable that is entered progressively and is a significant predictor is GPA. The proportion of the variance of final exam grade explained by the best fitting model increases to 48.2% when GPA is included. This indicates the importance of the impact of GPA on student performance.

Table 4

Model Summary for stepwise regression

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.623[a]	.389	.372	2.41638
2	.694[b]	.482	.452	2.25602

a. Predictors: (Constant), Nb_Session
b. Predictors: (Constant), Nb_Session, GPA

The ANOVA test of significance given in Table 5a indicates that the best regression model (Model 2) was significant (F = 16.282) at the 0.0001 level. The coefficients for this model and their standard errors are shown in Table 5b. From the values of this regression model, the predicted value of student exam grade can be calculated as follows:

Exam grade = -0.357 + 0.257 * *Nb_Session* + 0.842 * *GPA*

The coefficient values indicate that for every additional one-point increase in Number of Sessions we can expect Exam grade to increase by an average of 0.26. Also one-unit increase in GPA leads to an estimated enhancement of student exam grade of 0.84.

Table 5a

SPSS ANOVA output[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	133.676	1	133.676	22.894	.000[b]
	Residual	210.199	36	5.839		
	Total	343.875	37			
2	Regression	165.738	2	82.869	16.282	.000[c]
	Residual	178.137	35	5.090		
	Total	343.875	37			

a. Dependent Variable: Grade
b. Predictors: (Constant), Nb_Session
c. Predictors: (Constant), Nb_Session, GPA

Table 5b

Regression Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	8.986	.698		12.871	.000
	Nb_Session	.316	.066	.623	4.785	.000
2	(Constant)	-.357	3.779		-.094	.925
	Nb_Session	.257	.066	.507	3.890	.000
	GPA	.842	.335	.327	2.510	.017

a. Dependent Variable: Grade

Overall, the results of the regression analysis support the second hypothesis that online participation in a blended course setting will have an influence on performance outcomes. Online participation is best measured by the variable number of online sessions (*Nb_Session*). In the best fitting regression model, *Total_Time* and *Nb_View* were not significant predictor variables. This result is consistent with previous research (Biktimorov & Klassen, 2008; Korkofingas & Macri, 2013). However, it differs from other research reporting that total hits on a web course (Wilson, 2003) and number of files viewed (Zacharis, 2015) are significant explanatory variables of student performance. There have been other variables mentioned in the online learning literature and are shown to be correlated with performance grade – online quizzes (Macfayden & Dawson, 2010), self-tests (Korkofingas & Macri, 2013; Tempelaar, Rienties, & Giesbers, 2015).

However, in this study the way the blended learning course was designed encouraged students to use the quizzes on an optional basis. What was obligatory was to log on at least once each week to access the teaching materials (readings, lecture notes, etc.). Doing quizzes was optional. This might explain why the variable number of online sessions was found to be a strong predictor for academic success in this study.

Conclusion and implications

One of the research questions of this paper was to examine whether students' outcomes are influenced by course delivery method (traditional F2F versus blended). The results indicate that there were no significant differences between the experimental and control groups on final exam grade. The small differences between the two class settings can be accounted for by GPA. GPA as an indicator of student ability is a major determining factor in student learning outcomes.

The fact that students in both sections of the course performed equally, regardless of the delivery method, supports the idea that there is no inherent deficiency in the effectiveness of blended learning. An important condition when comparing students' outcomes across the two different learning settings is to control for GPA, which was proven to be a major predictor variable with a positive and significant impact on student performance.

Overall, the present study confirms published research arguing that blended learning is as useful and as effective as F2F learning, but contradicts the research that advocates the superiority of blended learning over traditional F2F learning in terms of student performance outcomes.

The other research question relates to the degree to which the implementation of blended learning significantly improves student learning in a research methods course. The overall results suggest that provision of online tools combined with F2F learning improves learning outcomes. Increased number of online sessions has a positive effect on student performance. The variable *Number of online sessions (*rather than *Total time online or Number of views)* is the best measure of student online engagement and participation, indicating that consistent and continuous participation in the course better explains the enhancement of student performance. Such a finding suggests that educators should encourage students to participate in an online course in a regular and continuous manner. This can be achieved by providing new materials on a weekly basis rather than all at once at the beginning of the term.

The present study is an important step in evaluating the usefulness and effectiveness of online materials implemented in a blended course setting.

Blended learning may provide an equally learning environment. There appears to be a justification for the investment of time by the instructor in designing blended courses.

Limitations and future research

Like in every study, this research has some limitations. The first limitation relates to sample size, which was relatively small. Also, the number of the participants for the experimental group compared to the control group was not equal, 40 vs 48, respectively. The second limitation relates to operationalizing learning performance, which was based on the final exam course grade. One might question the ability of final examinations and hence the final grade to measure successful student learning. However, they are the most universally used and easily accessible tools to assess learning outcomes (Suskie, 2004).

Further research needs to look at a number of non-covered areas. First of all, there is a need for research to examine other online participation indicators in a blended course such as the number of assignments submitted, the number of quizzes attempted or completed and reading and posting messages. In addition, there needs to be more research on students' satisfaction towards blended versus traditional instruction mode and on faculty preference for teaching across the two modes.

Chouaib Doukkali University at Eljadida

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The "End-of-Studies Project": Insights into an Inquiry-based Higher Education Pedagogy

IKBAL ZEDDARI[·]

Abstract

This article investigates senior undergraduate students' experiences with their end-of-studies project at the English Department, Mohammed V University, Rabat. Based on results from an information-seeking behavior survey, the current study reveals students' various conceptions of the research process and the difficulties they face throughout the various stages they go through. While students were found to approach the research task in a constructive way and evaluate their experiences in positive light, their lack of conceptual understanding of the research process and their inadequate technical skills seemed not to corroborate their good intentions. The article draws implications as to the integration of research skills across the curriculum and suggests ways to improve End-of Studies Project (henceforth, ESP) supervision to better meet the needs of students.

Introduction

Senior research projects offer a culminating learning experience for undergraduate students in Bachelor programsin many universities around the world. These research opportunities have been found to be one of the high impact education practices from which students draw substantial intellectual, cognitive, personal and professional gains (Kuh, 2008,Laursen,Hunter, Seymour, Thiry, and Melton, 2010**)**. Moroccan universities are no exceptionto this trend. At the faculty of letters, Rabat, for example,students have been traditionally required to fulfill such a requirement by producing a research monograph to cap off their undergraduate studies and demonstrate mastery of both their major's epistemic knowledge and practices.

The course titles might have changed from the 'memoire' as previously called in the old four-year license system to the current End-of-studies (ESP) research project appellation. However, the gap between students' level and the high course demands placed on them remains as wide (Bouzenirh, 1997).Even

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in its current conception, all what the ESP course seems to offer graduating students is 'a parachute jump' that they have to get right the first time to borrow Mead's analogy. Students may survive the demands of such a complex task, but the quality of the finished product leaves so much to be desired that calling it research may be a misnomer.

With these considerations in mind, the main contention of this paper is that research processes need to be weaved across the curriculum to better prepare students for the independence required for a successful senior year research experience. The review of the literature in section one will initially justify this move based on research oninquiry-orientedhigher education pedagogy. After a brief presentation of the methodology in the second section,section threein its turn provides empirical justification through an evaluation of students' actualESP experiences. The paper then concludes with a set of implications for a more efficient supervision process and recommends building a graded research-oriented program.

Review of the Literature

Analyzing the functions of the instructor-research in the penultimate decade of the last century, Bouzenirh (1997) tried to unveil the major problems that faced the introduction of a research-oriented program. Chief among these were constraints that related to the students, namely, their low language proficiency, theirlack of learning autonomy and their inability to relate to research. Also, the teaching of language skills consumed most of the time available, relegating research to a marginal position. The author rightly noted that the skills taught in the curriculum "[*did*]*not constitute the basic needs for fostering a research behaviour in the student*". Consequently, the students had very limited exposure to research processes in the old four-year license period as research was kept at the bare minimum. Even when both supervisors and students had to swallow the bitter pill of research in the senior year, their real nightmare was to locate resources in the humble university library and public libraries.

Now that almost two decades have elapsed, the situation may not seem quite as bleak. With the massive access to the Internet and the proliferation of Internet services, especially the more recent social web, what educators may be concerned with is not the lack of resources but the Huxleyan prophecy of information overload. Students will need to be trained in information literacy for them to be ableto "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information"(ALA, 1989). Hunting for resources is no more as serious a problem as it used to be, but the current challenge is for students to determine the extent of the information needed not to cast the net too wide at the cost of effectiveness and efficiency. They also need to be able to judge the veracity of the information and the credibility of its sources before they integrate it to their knowledge base and ethically use it in their research (ALA, 2000).

Previous research also shows that the students' information seeking behaviour online reflects a deficiency in information literacy not only among undergraduate students (Zeddari, in press) but even among Master's students (Biaz, Benamara, Khyati, andTalbi, 2007). While studentsare adept at using the most common internet services and applications, they might not be as proficient in using more advanced applications especially for academic ends. Here the technical inaptitude is coupled with intellectual deficiencies and unethical attitude to give way to the copy-paste phenomenon of plagiarism. This practice has generated much negative publicity,making its way into the headlines (Sakhi, 2011). It is claimed that the students are not the only ones to blame but partial responsibility lies with the supervisors**.** Hence, students need to be trained not only in locating information but also in its effective, efficient, and ethical use in academic research.

Another complaint that was legitimately voiced in Bouzenirh (1997) pertains to the low language proficiency of English majors. To overcome these inadequacies, instructors spend most of their teaching time imparting basic skills, which do not bridge the gap between the actual student level and the desired profile of senior undergraduates who are capable of carrying out independent research for the memoire in the four-year license system. One may argue thatthe problem may have worsened, now that the academic program is reduced to three years. It might actually have, but it is the main contention of this paper that research itself is a powerful teaching tool that could be used to teach even the most basic language skills to freshman students. Based on an evaluation of English majors' experiences with the ESP research project at the English Department, Rabat, this paper argues that given the complex nature of the skills which research entails, research processes need to be weaved across the curriculum to better prepare students for the independence required for a successful senior year research experience. This can be achieved if the literature on research-oriented higher education pedagogy is thoughtfully considered. But let us first consider why a research-oriented pedagogy legitimately presents itself as a viable alternative in higher education.

Research is one of the traditional functions of the modern university since its Humboldtian origins. It is its main ontological raison d'être next to teaching and training. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to make research skills a yardstick against which student performance as well as the effectiveness of the institution can be measured. The ESP Project as it is now conceptualized is the sole research opportunity offered to students to appropriate the values of research and assimilate all the skills, desired in graduates. Of course, the cost of lost opportunities may be too high.

A large body of literature outcries the ubiquitous mismatch between the skills profiles of graduates and the skills in demand in the marketplace. Graduates are found to be lacking not only in technical skills and discipline-

related knowledge but also in higher-order thinking skills, collaborative skills and other soft skills (e.g. interpersonal, social graces, personal habits) (OBG, 2013, Jaramillo and Melonio, 2011 among others). An inquiry-based curriculum will immerse students in "a self-directed, question-driven search for understanding" (Hudspith and Jenkins, 2001). Within this process, students will have to take a more active role, assume more responsibility for their learning and consequently unleash their creative potential. Also, learning within this experiential framework is viewed as a situated social process whereby students construct their knowledge in interaction with their environment, their peers and their instructors, thus, offering more room for collaboration and the development of the student as a whole individual(Dewy,1910, 1938).

From this literature emerge two main alternatives: The undergraduate research (UR) framework andthe inquiry-based approach. The former is defined by The Council on Undergraduate Research as "*an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate in collaboration with a faculty mentor that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline*" (The Council on Undergraduate Research as cited in Wenzel, 1997). Inquiry based learning (IBL), on the other hand, is defined as the *"study into a worthy question, issue, problem or idea. It is the authentic, real work that that someone in the community might tackle. It is the type of work that those working in the disciplines actually undertake to create or build knowledge"* (Galileo Educational Network, 2013 cited in Vaughan and Prediger, 2014; Galileo Educational Network, 2014).

Advocates of UR seem to raise the bar too high by stressing the work's originality, and formal dissemination in peer-reviewed journals as conditions on the research outcome. While this has been met with some success in the U.S, especially in science education and more recently in the humanities as well (Laursen, Hunter, Seymour, Thiry, and Melton, 2010; Grobman and Kinkead, 2010**)**, it is difficult if not impossible to reach all undergraduates campus-wide. IBL,though, offers a more realistic course-oriented inquiry, driven by more pedagogical concerns. While students' work needs to reflect the field's authentic research practices, the originality and dissemination conditions are relatively more relaxed. This trend has also been popular in science education (Moog and Spencer, 2008, Flick and Elderman, 2006) and recently earned currency in the humanities, language arts, and social sciences (Blessinger and Carfora, 2014). Both approaches find empirical justification in a large body of research, documenting the positive gains which students reap from being involved in research during their undergraduate studies. These benefits go beyond the short-term gains in knowledge, skill and improved academic achievement to more long-term professional and personal growth(For systematic reviews and meta-analyses see Crowe and Brakke, 2008; Friesen and Scott, 2013; Lopatto, 2010; Furtak, Seidel, Iverson & Briggs, 2009, Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, &Deantoni, 2004; Wood, 2010among others).

Methodology

As mentioned above, the present study enquires into students' experiences with their senior research project. It explores how English graduating majors evaluate their ESP experiences, their own research processes, and their reactions as supervisees to the supervision process.

Participants

The sample surveyed included 70 students in total with 37 female students and 33 male students. The majority of the respondentswere senior English major students graduating from the English department, Mohammed V University in the academic year 2014-2015,while almost one third of the sample graduated in the last three academic years.

Instrument

An information behaviour-seeking questionnaire was adapted to collect the data (Head, 2008). It consisted ofsix multiple-choice questions, four scales and an open-ended question. After a biographic data section, multiple choice questions were used to elicit data on students' initial steps into the research process, their weekly information search time, the monograph writing-up and editing time, and their approach to research. The supervisor-supervisee communication modes were also measured, using a similar technique in a section on supervision. Second, on a five-point Likert-type agreement scale, the respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agree with a set of statements to measure their perceived usefulness of various information sources (five items), and research-related courses(two items), the problems they faced during the research process (15 items) as well as the role played by their supervisor in their successful completion of the project (seven items). The questionnaire then closed with one open-ended question that asked the respondents to evaluate their ESP experience as a whole.

Procedure

An online version of the questionnaire was administered to the surveyed sample upon their graduation. At this point, they were believedto have gone through all the stages of the research process. The data collected was subsequently subjected to an exploratory quantitative analysis with the exception of the open-ended question, which lent itself to a more qualitative analysis. The following section will present and discuss the results of these analyses.

Results and Discussion

Students' perception of research and research-related courses

To gauge students' attitudes towards the ESP course, students were asked about what their most important priority was while doing their research projects. The answers were meant to reflect students orientation towards research as either shallow, deep or strategic (Entwistle, 2001). The chart in (1) below summarizes the responses.

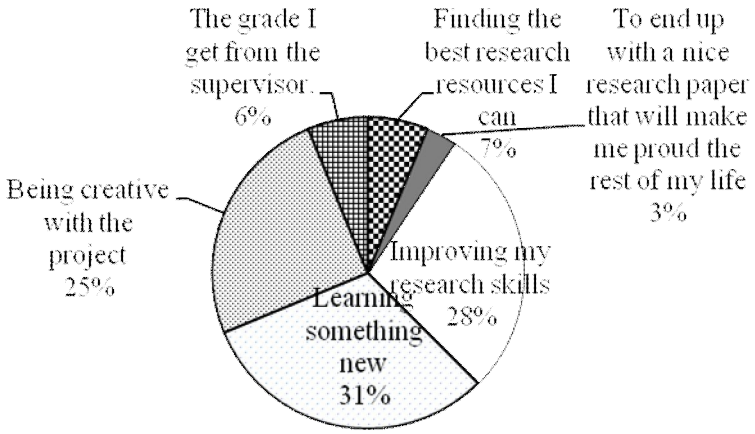

Figure (1): Students' Personal Goals in their research

The results show that the majority of the respondents adopted a very deep approach to research (87.5%). While more than one third of the sample wanted to learn something new, almost a third was mainly interested in improving their research skills. At the higher end of a deep approach to learning, 24.2 % wanted to be creative with their project. Shallow goals such as finding the best research or coming with a nice research paper or even the grade were not of equal importance. Such deep orientation has been associated with more learning gains in the literature (Entwistle, 2001) and could thus help the students persevere on task to its successful completion. This deep orientation is also clear from students'narrative accounts of their ESP research experience. One respondent affirmed that

> *My research experience was very rich and fruitful. While working on my ESP, I realized that the research process and basing your research on the previous reading and planning the steps to follow was much more important than the paper itself. (Senior undergraduate student)*

Another justification for the ESP course comes from the students' perceived usefulness of other research-related courses, namely, research methodology and

seminar readings. In the current accredited undergraduate program at the faculty of letters in Rabat, the stand-alone undergraduate research methodology course was discontinued, yet its objectives have been integrated into the ESP course in a preliminary seminar readings course, taught by the potential supervisor. To probe into the effectiveness of this pedagogical move,students were asked to report on how useful they found these two courses. The results are detailed in table (1) below.

Table (1): Students' perceived usefulness of research-related courses

	Stronglydisagree	**Somewhatdisagree**	**Somewhatagree**	**Stronglyagree**	**Neitheragreenordisagree**
Research Methodology	15.2	6.1	51.5	0	27.3
Seminar Readings	9.1	12.1	45.5	24.2	3

While both courses have been judged by more or less half of the respondents as useful, none of the respondents strongly agreed that the stand-alone methodology course was useful to their research needs. 24.2%, however, strongly agreed that their seminar readings course was useful to them while undertaking their research project. This goes up 69.7% when coupled with the 'somewhat agree' responses. This pattern of results provides empirical ground for the pedagogical division of labour currently adopted. The stand-alone methodology course was felt to be too general for the specific needs of the various research practices in the various fields of study and students may not have always been able to draw on the skills they developed in the course in their end-of studies project. Integrating the methodology component within the seminar readings and the ESP course, thus, helps each supervisor to train the students in the research practices most relevant to a successful ESP experience in the domain they investigate.However, one caveat is important to note as this change may have been undertaken at a cost. The graduates may be unaware of research practices in related sub-fields of their major. For example, a student training in theoretical linguistics may miss the quantitative and qualitative methods used in applied linguistics or sociolinguistics. With this overall appreciation of students' research experiences under our belt, it is important to dig deeper to reveal the research processes students are involved in while doing their undergraduate research. The next section will detail this point.

Students' research processes

To investigate students' research processes, the respondents were asked to report onthe initial steps which they took in their research process. As expected,

on top of the list were talking to the supervisor, consulting seminar textbooks and readings as well as doing online searches. While all three are reasonable first steps,given their high accessibility, more scholarly research resources are strikingly absent. They emerged as a third step but only in very modest percentages. The figures are reported in table (2) below.

Table (2): Students' Initial Steps into the Research Process

	1st Step	2nd Step	3rd Step
Talk to the supervisor	57.6	18.2	9.1
Seminar textbooks and readings	0	36.4	21.2
Online Search	18.2	33.3	27.3
An online community encyclopedia (e.g.Wikipedia)	0	0	3
Print scholarly encyclopedia (e.g., Britannica)	3	0	9.1
Online resources available through the university	0	3	3
University library catalogues	0	3	3
Visit the university Library	0	3	3
Buy a book(s)	6.1	0	9.1
No answer	0	3	12.1

The pattern of results which emerged from table (2) above understandably gives precedence to more 'soft' information sources such as personal communication and online searches as preliminary steps at the expense of more scholarly sources. This preference, however, goes beyond the justifiable initial steps and seems to be rooted in students'attitudes towards information sources.This iscorroborated by the analysis of students' perceived usefulness of the various information sources readily available to them. The results of this analysis are reported on in table (3)below.

Table (3): Perceived Usefulness of information resources

	Stronglydisagree	Somewhatdisagree	Somewhatagree	Stronglyagree	Neitheragreenordisagree
Library catalogues	24	30.3	12.1	18.2	15.2
Online databases	18.2	30.3	18.2	21.2	12.1
Library resources on the	21.2	33.3	15.2	18.2	12.1

shelf					
Articles on the authors' websites	0	6.1	30.3	51.5	12.1
Ebook-sharing websites	0	9.1	9.1	75.8	6.1

A great number of undergraduate researchers do not perceive library materials and professional online databases as useful. This negative attitude may be attributed to their lack of awareness of the existence of these resources and/or lack of skill in their use. Previous experience shows that students may have never set foot in the university library by their graduation and may not even know about the databases available through the university websites. This suggests that undergraduates need firstto be made aware of the wealth of resources made available through the university and then be trained in their appropriate use for academic ends.

Of course, the usefulness of online materials such as articles on the authors' websites or e-book sharing websites cannot be overlooked. They may actually serveas a more accessible alternative to print material. However, this consequently raises issues not only of skill but also of ethical use of online sources, which will be discussed later. Regardless of these considerations, students rejoice in this wealth of information as one senior undergraduate researcher declared.

> *Had I not had access to ebooks on the internet, I would not have finished my ESP, especially with the scarcity of books in English whether at the faculty's humble library or public libraries. (Senior undergraduate student)*

Students' over-reliance on online sources is also reflected in the amount of time they weekly allocate to information seeking as depicted in the pie chart in (2).

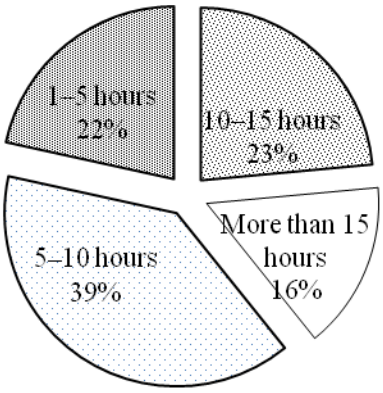

Figure 2: Weekly Resources Research Time

Students were found to spend an immense amount of timetrying to locate books and articles relevant to their research. Almost a quarter spend 10 to 15 hours weekly while a third spends more than 15 hours. Another third remains within a ten-hour time slot weekly. This extensive search for materials reveals a lack of focus and eventually results in information overload, a point which will be taken later in the discussion of the problems which undergraduate researchers face.This practice eventually does not leave much time to study any of the material in depth.

Another crucial phase in the research process is the writing-up and editing of the actual paper. Students were asked to report on how long it took them to write and edit their monograph. As expected, this high stake assignment occupied most of the students' study time during the semester. Two thirds of the respondents reportedly spent three months or more to finalize their paper. 22% spent up to two months and only 18% spent less than a month.

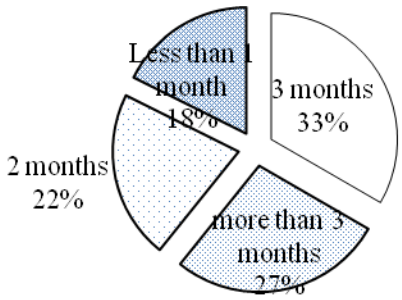

Figure (3): Paper Writing and Editing Time

Given the positive deep orientation with which senior undergraduates face the research task and the amount of time and effort they invest in this high stake assignment, it seems reasonable to assume that this experience should have considerable learning gains for the students. As the qualitative analysis discussed at the end of the results section reveals, the ESP course is a transformative experience in the students' eyes. However, based on the researcher's examination of students' monographs both as a supervisor and as a second reader, it seems that their final paper still leaves much to be desired. It is true the students are learning a lot but they are still missing a lot more, both in terms of knowledge and skill, to reasonably justify the amount of time and effort invested in their capstone course. Thus, it makes sense to investigate the problem they have with the research process that may be a stumbling block, impeding their progress. The coming section will elaborate on this point.

Students' problems during the research process

To pinpoint the problems the students experienced while conducting their ESP research, the respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with typical undergraduate research difficulties. These related to supervision, research processes, internal factors, the writing process, and technical word-processing skills. The results are presented in table (4) below.

Table (4): Problems experiencedduringthe research Process

	Stronglydisagree	Somewhatdisagree	Somewhatagree	Stronglyagree	Neitheragreenordisagree
Not having enough information from the supervisor to begin the assignment	33.3	24.2	24.2	18.2	0
Conforming to the supervisor's perspective	39.4	24.2	12.1	21.2	3
Understanding the Supervisor's expectations	27.3	24.2	24.2	24.2	0
Narrowing down the topic	6.1	30.3	27.3	27.3	9.1
Understanding the literature	39.4	18.2	33.3	6.1	3
Evaluating the credibility of sources	9.1	24.2	24.2	27.3	15.2
Information overload	15.2	18.2	42.4	21.2	3
Using the library	12.1	3	15.2	51.5	18.2
procrastination	12.1	15.2	45.5	21.2	6.1
Anxiety	18.2	21.2	21.2	21.2	18.2
Writing up the paper	27.3	27.3	30.3	9.1	6.1
Academicformatting	36.4	15.2	33.3	9.1	6.1
Writing in academic style	33.3	24.2	39.4	3	0
Plagiarism	30.3	9.1	30.3	24.2	6.1
Typing the paper	63.6	3	15.2	15.2	3

It seems that each of the problems investigated constitutes a stumbling block on the students' route to research. However, not all of them make the journey as unpleasant. The respondents tended to be divided on the problems

related to supervision. While they did not feel the obligation to conform to their supervisor's perspectives, a substantial number felt a need to receive more information from the supervisor to start the assignment (42.4%) and to understand their expectations (48.4%). As far as academic writing is concerned, half of the surveyed sample did not agree that writing per se posed a serious problem though they admitted that they found it difficult to avoid plagiarism. This echoes the concerns about plagiarism voiced in the review of the literature section above (Sakhi, 2011).

More serious problems pertained to the research process as such. On the positive side, almost half of the students did not report having problems understanding the literature. However, this figure falls down to 36.4% when it comes to narrowing down the research topic, and to (33.3%) for problems related to information overload and sources credibility evaluation. On the other side of the continuum, the majority of the respondents suffered from information overload (66.6%) and more than half had problems, narrowing down the research topic or evaluating the credibility of sources and even using the library. These results suggest that while undergraduate seniors may possess lower information literacy skills such as locating information, especially online, their ability to locate information offline is rather limited. They also tended to be lacking in higher information processing skills.

Behind a successful research process is a self-regulated researcher, who could manage not only the research process but also oneself as the engine driving the research project. In this respect, 66.6% admitted that they could get over their own tendency to procrastinate and 42.4% had research anxiety. These internal factors could be very detrimental to students, however their conceptual knowledge or research skill level might be.

Least serious of all the problems investigated was typing the paper. This technical skill was not found to pose a serious challenge to the students during their research process. Word-processing is a basic computer skill at which even freshman students are adept (Zeddari, in press). Given the detrimental effect of all these problems on both the ESP process and product, the supervisor's responsibility seems to be magnified in bringing the project to fruition.In this regard, the next section will unveil students' perceptions of what aspects of supervision benefited them the most in their research process.

The supervisor's role

Given the myriad of problems which senior undergraduates faced during their ESP project, there seemed to be a heavy burden on the supervisors' shoulders. To tap into students' perceptions of the supervisor's role, the respondents were asked how their supervisor helped them do better at completing their end-of-studies project. The results are presented in table (5).

Table (5): Students' perceptions of their supervisor's role

	Stronglydisagree	Somewhatdisagree	Somewhatagree	Stronglyagree	Neitheragreenordisagree
Research process coaching	6.1	3	**18.2**	**66.7**	6.1
Separate deadlines	15.2	3	**12.1**	**66.7**	3
Free topic choice	6.1	3	**24.2**	**54.5**	12.1
Regular group meetings	9.1	6.1	**9.1**	**66.7**	9.1
Drafts comments	6.1	12.1	**21.2**	**51.5**	9.1
Theoretical training	9.1	12.1	**21.2**	**51.5**	6.1
Topic choice Guidance	12.1	12.1	**18.2**	**39.4**	18.2

The respondents in the surveyed sample were fully aware of the role played by their supervisor in the successful completion of their project. It is interesting to note that coaching students in the research process emerged on top of the list with (84.9%) of the students testifying to its importance, followed by setting separate deadlines (78.8%) and having regular group meetings (75.8%). Together, these could counter the negative effect of procrastination, which students were found to suffer from in the previous section. Also, the majority appreciated the theoretical training they received as well as the comments they hadon their drafts. A typical student account of the supervisor's role is presented here from the qualitative data.

> *My supervisor had a great impact on the whole experience. His guidelines, availability, assistance and understanding helped me a lot in the researching and writing process.*
> *(Senior undergraduate student)*

Apart from the technical side of academic supervision, the students also brought to the fore its human side. As in the above testimony, the student researcher appreciatednot only the supervisor's guidance and availability but his understanding as well, sheddinglight at the human dimension in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Such accounts permeate the qualitative data with phrases that highlights the supervisor's understanding, cooperation and care or lack of them.

As for topic choice, while the majority appreciated the opportunity they were given to choose the topic freely (78.7%), more than half still welcomed some guidance in their topic choice. One student recounted:

> *Our supervisor asked us to come up with topics by ourselves, which I found a little bit hard to cope with. I just hoped she suggested some topics or even imposed some from which we could pick one. (Senior undergraduate student)*

Another crucial element of the supervisor-supervisee relationship is communication. Various modes of communication may be used, ranging from the conventional face-face group meetings to more virtual online forms. To explore which modes of communication were more prevalent and gauge students' attitudes towards them, students were asked which modes they used with their supervisor and their overall evaluation of their ESP experiences revealed their attitudes towards each of them. The results are plotted in the pie chart below.

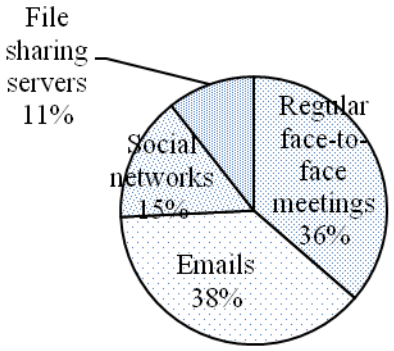

Figure (4): Supervisor-supervisee modes of communication.

The results showed that communication between the supervisors and their supervisees is not generally restricted to regular face-to-face meetings (36%) but equally extends to emails (38%). To a lesser degree, social networks such as Facebook pages and file-sharing servers (e.gDropbox, Google Drive) are also in current use. Students were found to make adequate use of these virtual modes of communication for academic ends when they are trained to do so. Previous research showed that although students may be familiar with online environments, their ICT skill does not transfer automatically in academic contexts (Biaz et al., 2007; Zeddari, in press). One student's account best illustrates this point.

> *I have learnt to use technology with my supervisor to carry out my research effectively via Dropbox and constant*

> *electronic emails to ease the process of commenting and correcting. (S6 Undergraduate Student)*

Students' Learning Gains

Based on the students' responses to the open-ended question in the questionnaire, this section attempts to qualitatively gauge the most salient learning gains that they had during the research process. All the respondents admitted that despite the challenging nature of the ESP course, it has been a significant learning experience to them. They described this experience with a myriad of positive adjectives, ranging from useful, interesting through rich and enriching to unique, enlightening, and thought-provoking. All these qualifications attest to the role this culminating experience plays in the students'education.The students also reported various learning gains. As one student put it,

> *Going through such an experience helped me develop many academic writing, reading, and research skills. (S6 Undergraduate Student)*

It is clear that students learning gains extend beyond the language skills to more advanced research skills. This dichotomy of learning gains cuts across students' accounts of their research experiences. However, apart from these technical skills, the ESP experience has been interestingly conceived of by the students as a rite of passage, which allowed them to discover a new academic world of research. Numerous are those who admitted that working with the supervisor on their monograph opened up a new horizon to them. Below are a few typical testimonies.

> *Writing a research paper is not an easy task; however, it helped us to improve ourselves and get insights into the academic field. It was a unique experience.*
>
> *It took me to a different world I didn't know. (Senior undergraduate students)*

In addition to the academic gains, the respondents also demonstrated affective gains. Most accounts are permeated with the students'sense of ownership of the research project, their pride in their achievements and self-satisfaction with both the process and the product of the experience. In brief, it is clear that they have learnt to relate to research and that their academic self-concept has been boosted by this experience. This goes in line with previous research, which attributed a positive effect to self-referenced beliefs in students' academic achievement, including writing (Zeddari, 2003). The successful completion of the ESP monograph emerged as a unique experience, through which students develop their academic identity and assertiveness. These personal gains lay behind the conceptual and technical gains discussed above.

Considering the pattern of results the present study has yielded so far, it seems that the opportunities that the ESP course offers outnumber the constraints undergraduate researchers face. Despite the students' information-related problems, their negative internal factors, and variable skill level in research processes, they tended to evaluate this culminating experience in positive light. They considered it as an eye-opening initiation rite to the world of research, which allowed them to have substantial learning gains. The supervisor understandably played a key role in Students' completion of the ESP project. The experience also seemed to have boosted the students' academic self-concept. However, students were conscious of the unique nature of this experience as they admitted that it was their first time doing research that would culminate in a formal academic monograph, a fact that seemed to have multiplied the challenges they had to face. These concerns are voiced in the students' testimonies below.

> *It was actually exciting, yet a bit challenging since it was my first experience with writing an end-of-study project.*
>
> *The research process is a crucial part of the educational system. Though it is restricted to one semester, it is very rich.*
> *(Senior Undergraduate Students)*

Not introducing research skills earlier in the curriculum seems to make the ESP experience in the senior year extremely challenging to the students. This makes the learning curve steeper as senior undergraduate researchers have to juggle many balls at the same time, at times more than they could reasonably handle. Also, students are deprived of the opportunity to learn from trial and error and, thus, have to get it right the first time. Given these shortcomings, the following section will try to suggest some pedagogical implications to ensure a smoother ESP experience.

Implications and Recommendations

From the present study, a number of implications and recommendations emanate. As the results attribute a key role to the supervisor in the successful completion of their supervisee's research projects, it is crucial for them to address the problems which students face to maximize their chances of success. One serious problem to mention is information overload. With their dominantly online information seeking mode, students are drowned in massive amounts of information, most of the time irrelevant or beyond the scope of their project at best. Two suggestions are in place in this respect. It would be interesting to train students in information literacy skills for them to be able to sieve through the resources available on the Internet. Another suggestion would be to limit the information students will have to deal with by assigning a bibliography with the most basic readings as well as more advanced ones. The students' task will be to locate these resources and develop a reading file with note and reference

cards. This, of course, does not exclude the option that students would enrich their bibliography with other relevant sources.

Students' individual differences also need to be taken into consideration. First, less autonomous learners may appreciate more guidance not only in the development of an efficient and pertinent bibliography but even in the choice of the topic itself. Free topic choice is not always the best option for all students. Some may be better aided if they are assigned a research topic to more efficiently manage their research schedule.

Procrastination and performance anxiety also emerged as impediments to a successful completion of the research project. To limit the negative effect of these internal factors, setting early and regular performance requirements could help students remain on task within reasonable time limits. Early success could also boost their self-confidence and research self-efficacy.

As far as communication between supervisors and their supervisees is concerned, face-to-face regular meetings are the norm and emails have also been found to be taking ground, but with email comes the problem of versioning. Students generally become confused and find it difficult to track the latest edited version of their work. The use of the freely available online servers such as Dropbox or Google Drive couldsolve this problem as both supervisor and supervisee may synchronically collaborate while editing the same document. Of course, students may needto be trained to use these applications for academic ends.

Similarly, the fact that students faced research for the first time in their senior year is believed to have made their task more challenging, if not daunting. An inquiry-based investigative approach could weave research skills across the curriculum to allow students to practice academic writing and research skillssince their freshman year. One missing typical assignment that holds a lot of promise is the documented essay. This can be applied not only in writing courses but also in content courses. If courses are brought to be more in dialogue with each other, various research and academic skills could be integrated into different courses to ensure an efficient division of labour with each course having a research component as part of its content and methodology specification.

Conclusion

The present study has afforded us insights into senior undergraduate students' research processes in their ESP projects. Overall, the opportunities seemed to outweigh the constraints. The most promising of all was the deep orientation with which the students approached their research assignment. Equally positive weretheir self-reportedgains that extended not only beyond improvements in conceptual knowledge, gains in linguistic proficiency, and technical skills, but also to their academic self-appraisals and affective traits. To these

undergraduate students, the ESP experience was an initiation rite that allowed them to make their first steps into the world of academic research. This being said,they, however, faced various obstacles on their research journey as it was their first research experience. Information-related problems, negative internal factors, and variable skill level in research processes all seemed to have been stumbling stones on their way. The role of the supervisor turned out to be vital in their surmounting these hindrances and bringing their project to successful completion.

Mohammed V University at Rabat

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لوصف مشروعه في توظيف هذه التقنية وطريقة تقويمها. وينتهي الباحث إلى أن نجاح هذه التقنية كان نسبيا مما يستدعي المزيد من البحث فيها من أجل تطويرها وتفعيلها.

أما المقالة السادسة فهي تناقش نتائج دراسة شبه تجريبية لتقنية مزج تقنية التكنولوجيا الحديثة (learning blended) في تدريس مادة "مناهج البحث" لطلبة شعبة الانجليزية - الفصل الخامس. ومن خلال مقارنة نقطة تقويم المادة لدى المجموعة الخاضعة للبحث التجريبي (experimental group) والتي استفادت من المضامين المتوفرة لديهم عبر منصة موودل (Moodle) وكذا نقطة تقويم المادة لدى مجموعة التحكم (control group) بين الباحث أنه على الرغم من حصول الطلبة الخاضعين للبحث التجريبي على نقاط عالية إلا أن ذلك لم يمكن ذا دلالة إحصائية. ويخلص الباحث إلى أن هذه الطريقة لا تختلف كثيرا في نتائجها عن الطريقة المباشرة في التدريس.

وتهتم المقالة السابعة والأخيرة بمشروع نهاية الدراسة، وتبين النتائج المتوصل إليها من خلال استطلاع آراء الطلبة حول مشروع التخرج أن موقف الطلاب ايجابي لأنه يساهم في تطوير معارفهم وقدراتهم اللغوية، وكذا الرقي بمهاراتهم في تقنية البحث. كما لاحظ الباحث أن المشروع يمثل بالنسبة للطلبة فرصة للتقويم الذاتي على المستوى الأكاديمي، غير أنه سجل مجموعة من الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطالب في مجال البحث منها صعوبة الحصول على المعلومات أحيانا وطريقة تفاعله مع تقنيات البحث الأكاديمي. ولهذا يقترح الباحث إدماج مناهج البحث العلمي على طول مسار التحصيل الدراسي للطالب.

وختاما، نأمل أن تكون مقالات هذا العدد من "مجلة اللغات واللسانيات" قد قدمت دراسات تتوفر على الشروط العلمية الأكاديمية وتتأسس على تجارب فعلية وعملية واقعية يمكن استجلابها في مجالات تعليمية مختلفة. ولهذا يمكن اعتبار هذا العدد كأرضية لتطوير التعاضد على الصعيد المهني. وقد تكون أبحاث قادمة فضاءات لتفعيل طرق أخرى لهذه العلاقة التعاضدية على مستوى التعليم الجامعي.

جامعة شعيب الدكالي، الجديدة

اختار المقال الثاني معاينة مهارة الكتابة والإنشاء لدى طلبة الفصل الأول في شعبة الانجليزية وتقويمها تقويما شاملا بناء على معايير موضوعية ترتبط بالتركيب ودقة التعبير على التوالي، مستعملا في ذلك منصة موودل (Moodle) لإنجاز مجموعة من التمارين المنزلية وتبادل المعلومات والملاحظات بين الطلبة. وقد خلص البحث إلى أن مهارة الكتابة قد تطورت نسبيا بين بداية التجربة ونهايتها، حيث أثر البرنامج المختلط والتعاوني في مجال دقة التعبير والترقيم، في حين لم يكن له الأثر الواضح على مستوى التركيب.

اهتمت المقالة الثالثة بمعايير التجديد في مقررين دراسيين مختلفين لتدريس مادة "منهجية التعليم الجامعي"، مركزا على المضامين وطرق تنظيمها وتعليمها وتقويمها. وقد اعتمد الباحث في ذلك على مسارين، يتعلق الأول بتحليل مضامين الوثيقتين، والثاني باستجواب الأساتذة وتعرف مواقفهم ليستخلص أوجه التشابه والاختلاف في المقررين، وكذا نقط القوة والضعف لكل واحد منهما. وقد عمل الباحث على استخلاص مظاهر التجديد في هاذين المقررين كإشراك المتعلمين في تحديد مكونات المقرر وإدماج تكنولوجيا المعلوميات الحديثة في تقديم المادة.

تنطلق المقالة الرابعة من الأهمية التي يكتسيها توظيف التقنيات الحديثة للمعلوميات في التعلم وذلك للتأكيد على أهمية إدراج هاته التقنيات في التقويم باعتبارها تمثل جزءا مهما في العملية التعليمية. وقد تأسس المقال على دراسة تحليلية لإنجازات الطلبة في مادة الإنشاء بالفصل الأول وهم يتلقون بصفة مسترسلة تغذية راجعة خاصة لكل واحد منهم وذلك من خلال توظيف نموذج التوجيه التقني للأنترنت (cyber-coaching model). وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن هناك تحسنا ملموسا في تقنيات الكتابة وأبرزت إيجابية تجاوب الطلبة مع هذه التقنية التدريبية، ولهذا فهي تؤكد على فاعلية نموذج التقويم عبر تقنيات الانترنت وتحث على ضرورة استغلاله في تدريس مختلف وحدات اللغة الانجليزية في مسار الدراسة بالجامعة.

وتهتم المقالة الخامسة بتوظيف ما يمكن تسميته بقلب فعل التعلم (Flipped Learning) في تدريس مادة ""مدخل لدراسة الصوتيات" وذلك اعتمادا على الإنجاز القبلي للدرس من قبل المتعلم. وترتكز هذه التقنية البيداغوجية التجديدية على مشاهدة فيديوهات متاحة للطلبة على شبكة الانترنت. يعرف صاحب المقالة هذه التقنيات وخصوصياتها وطرق الاشتغال بها، لينتقل بعد ذلك

تقديم

الرداد الركيك[*]

توالت مجموعة من الأبحاث والندوات التي اهتمت بدرس الانجليزية في الجامعة المغربية والإكراهات التي يعاني منها منذ أن دخل الإصلاح حيز التطبيق سنة 2003، غير أن هذه الأبحاث والندوات تمركزت في غالبها حول المشاكل والمعيقات التي يعاني منها هذا الدرس في إطار التواصل بين الأستاذ والطالب، واقتراح مجموعة من الحلول التي يمكنها أن تذلل هذه العقبات. وقد ارتأت الأبحاث التي يتضمنها هذا العدد أن تأخذ مسارا آخر في مقاربة درس الانجليزية بالجامعة المغربية وذلك من خلال الاطلاع على مجموعة من التجارب التي أنجزت في فصول الانجليزية بمجموعة من الكليات وما توصلت إليه من نتائج وخلاصات ستساهم لا محالة في تطوير هذا الدرس البيداغوجي.

يضم هذا العدد مجموعة من البحوث الدقيقة القائمة على رؤية علمية واضحة تحترم شروط البحوث الميدانية الأكاديمية، بحيث إن كل بحث هو تجربة فعلية داخل الفصل يهدف إلى تفعيل وأجرأة مجموعة من التصورات التي تعطي درس الانجليزية نفسا جديدا في الممارسة البيداغوجية الجامعية مما يجعل من هذا العدد مساهمة فعلية وجادة في النقاش الدائر حول سبل الرقي بجودة التعليم وتحسين وسائل التعلم. ولهذا يقدم العدد ثمار تجارب ذات قيمة مضافة للدرس البيداغوجي يمكن أن يستفيد منها على السواء، الأستاذ الجامعي الممارس والطالب الأستاذ الذي هو في طور التكوين ويطمح لاكتساب مهارات خاصة في مجال تدريس اللغة الانجليزية.

يعالج المقال الأول نتائج تجربة مزج تكنولوجيا المعلوميات الحديثة الانترنت (blended learning) في تدريس مادتي "التواصل الشفهي" و"منهجية التعليم الجامعي". وقد تبين من خلال دراسة تصورات الطلبة ومقاربة نقط القوة ونقط الضعف في هذه التجربة أن إدماج تكنولوجيا الانترنت في هاتين المادتين ساهمت إلى حد ما في تحفيزهم على التعلم وتمكينهم من تحقيق مجموعة من الأهداف المسطرة للمادتين، ومع ذلك تبقى النتائج المتحققة ذات قيمة مضافة يمكن فقط الاستئناس بها في هذا المجال.

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اللغات و اللسانيات

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المدير: موحى الناجي
رئيسة التحرير: فاطمة صديقي
المنسق: عبد السلام جامعي
عنوان المراسلة:
ص.ب. 5720 فاس- سيدي ابراهيم ، فاس 30014، المغرب
الفاكس 10 09 61 35(0) 212+
الصفحات الإلكترونية: http://www. lang-ling.on.ma - البريد الإلكتروني: mennaji2002@yahoo.fr
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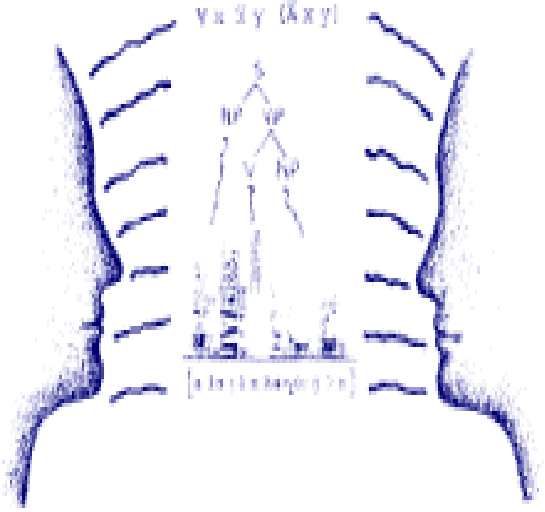

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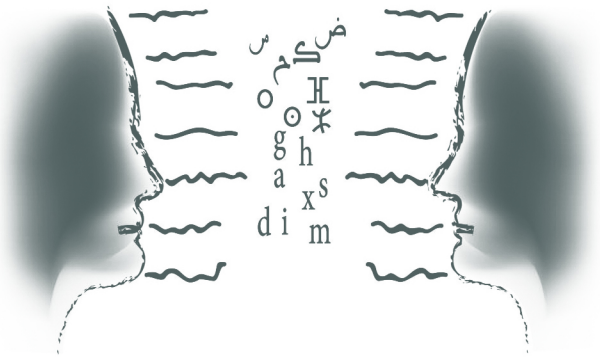

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