

BLENDING THE ON AND OFF-CAMPUS CLASSROOM: AN EXPERIENCE IN COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN TEFL

Bamond, Victoria¹, Lopez Lago, Jose Maria²

1: UEM Language Center
Facultad de Artes y Comunicación
Universidad Europea de Madrid
c/Tajo S/N, Villaviciosa de Odón, Madrid 28670
e-mail: victoria.bamond@uem.es
web: <http://www.uem.es>

2: UEM Language Center
Facultad de Artes y Comunicación
Universidad Europea de Madrid
c/Tajo S/N, Villaviciosa de Odón, Madrid 28670
e-mail: josemaria.lopez@uem.es
web: <http://www.uem.es>

Abstract. *Education is transforming to meet the demands of a world where technology is continuously changing the way we live, work, communicate and learn. Learners today are born with a surprising adaptability to new technology and embrace it instantaneously, making it difficult for older generations of teachers to keep up. The role of teachers has changed to that of mentors or guides who help students critically assess the information available, recognize valid sources, make connections with those who can offer support, and prepare them in the competences required in their profession. Technology-based methodologies are helping teachers do this: Blended Learning, Computer-based Learning, Web-based Collaborative Learning, and Computer-mediated Communication, to name a few. This holds true in Teaching English as a Foreign Language as well, where teachers in many cases are moderators guiding students through their online learning. This paper presents an experience at Universidad Europea de Madrid where technology allowed both on-campus and off-campus students access to learning EFL in an innovative way. Synchronous Computer-mediated Communication was used in a face-to-face classroom and online simultaneously. Results will show that this format was successful in achieving the learning goals of students who were both on and off campus.*

Key words: Education, EFL/ESL, TEFL, Computer-mediated Communication, Technology-based Learning, Universidad Europea de Madrid

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, education has been in a constant state of transformation in its attempt to meet the demands of an interconnected world where technology is continuously changing the way we live, work, communicate and learn. Learners today are born with a surprising adaptability to new technology and embrace it instantaneously, making it difficult for older generations of teachers to keep up. Charles Dziuban, Patsy Moskal, and Joel Hartman believe “the new metaphor for higher education is *The ability to use*

knowledge effectively is power.’ The immediate availability of data, information, and knowledge to university students is astounding. The Millennial generation has much more access to information than its professors did” (Dziuban, C.D., Moskal, P.D. & Hartman, J, 2005:12).

The role of teachers has changed from that of information providers and knowledge transmitters to mentors and guides who help students critically assess the great deal of information instantly available. This new role includes teaching students how to recognize valid sources, make connections with others who can offer support, and prepare them in the competences and skills required in their future profession. Technology-based methodologies are helping teachers do this: Blended Learning, Computer-based Learning, Web-based Collaborative Learning, and Computer-mediated Communication, to name a few. This holds true in Teaching English as a Foreign Language as well, where teachers in many cases are becoming moderators, guiding students through their online learning. This paper presents an experience at Universidad Europea de Madrid where technology allowed teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to offer both on-campus and off-campus students access to learning in an innovative way. Synchronous Computer-mediated Communication was used in a tailor-made English course in order to offer face-to-face classroom-based learning and online learning simultaneously. Classes were regularly scheduled and students were able to choose whether they attended class physically or virtually, at any given day and time.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In an article from 2001, Prensky claims that the students entering higher education today are “digital natives”: people who have grown up with cellphones, computers, and video games, and who are “native speakers” of the digital language of computers and the internet (Prensky, 2001). Higher learning institutions have responded by offering an ever-increasing variety of digital options, from fully online, synchronous and asynchronous courses, to blended learning courses, which combine traditional face-to-face classes with online components (Sloan survey 2009, qtd. in Moore, 2010). Several studies to date have noted the benefits of synchronous chat in the foreign language classroom (Pellettieri, 2000; Veerman, 2001), citing that they foster negotiation of meaning and comprehensible output, requisites for language learning to take place (Long, 1996; Swain 2005). Other studies have argued for the use of WIMBA and other synchronous “classrooms” because they promote interactivity (Skylar, 2009) and increased participation, group cohesion, and satisfaction for students who are intimidated in the traditional classroom (McBrien, Jones & Cheng, 2009; qtd. in Moore, 2010). To the best of our knowledge, there haven’t been any articles written about using WIMBA to combine the synchronous CMC and face-to-face classroom environments in a foreign language learning course.

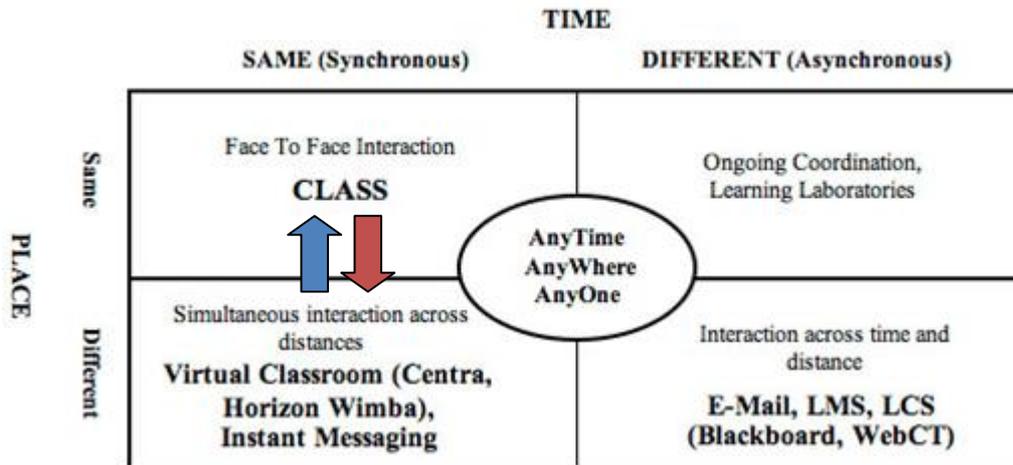


Figure 1. Modified from Bostrom, 2001

3. OBJECTIVES

A group of second year Medicine students at Universidad Europea de Madrid needed a Medical English course for a clinical internship at Liverpool University. The course focused on Academic English and practice with doctor-patient language in English. The group was comprised of a total of 20 advanced level (mostly C1) students from a variety of international backgrounds. As the internship was a summer placement and the Spring class session was over, many of the students had gone home for the summer break and we had some students on-campus and others off-campus. This made it impossible to offer the course in a traditional classroom format. The solution offered was to give the students the choice of attending either in person or online through a synchronous Computer-mediated methodology implemented using the WIMBA software. This format was an innovation in the EFL classroom at UEM and one of the objectives of this experience was to explore the viability of integrating this format into our EFL curriculum. We were particularly interested in the possibility of creating a real classroom environment among students who were physically present in the classroom and others who attended online. Other important objectives included exposing students to the Liverpoolian (“Scouse”) accent through listening and comprehension activities, emphasizing the intercultural aspects they would encounter during their stay abroad, and giving students the opportunity to perform role plays in which they could practice doctor and patient language. This scheme is based on Coyle’s four C’s (content, cognition, communication, culture) of content and language integrated learning (Coyle, 1999).

4. EXPERIENCE

Seventeen students and four teachers participated in this English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, which was offered in two different modalities—in the classroom and online—but synchronously. It was an intensive, voluntary course of approximately 25 hours, offered for a little over one week for approximately five hours a day. At a set time, students would either go to the physical classroom or log in on the virtual parallel classroom set up in WIMBA, a virtual collaborative classroom integrated into the university’s Moodle platform. Attendance was relatively high, considering the fact that this was a voluntary, summer course (figure 2). The authors consider this point to be of

particular interest, especially when considering the intensity and long hours of the course, and believe this to demonstrate a high level of motivation on the part of the students in this course.

English for Liverpool Course Attendance											
June 13th		June 14th		June 15th		June 16th		June 17th		June 21st	
f2f	online	f2f	online	f2f	online	f2f	online	f2f	online	f2f	online
11	0	4	5	9	2	0	5	5	2	3	2
Totals											
face to face attendance							31,37%				
online attendance							15,69%				
Total attendance							47,06%				

Figure 2. Students' face to face and online attendance on Liverpool Course, 2010

The applications within the WIMBA program allowed teachers to upload PowerPoint presentations, use Interactive Whiteboard materials, launch hyperlinks, and assign students to Breakout rooms for group activities. Students could follow the presentation and whiteboard activities in real time, or they could download the class session later as an mp4. During class, students could interact with one another and the teacher through individual and group chat. This blend of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools resulted to be greatly convenient to the students, as those few students who responded with feedback mentioned in their comments (Annex 1). In addition to the flexibility it afforded the students, this class format provided students with many opportunities to interact with the language material and other students in unique learning environments.

This was the first time both students and teachers had used WIMBA in a classroom. Therefore it was imperative to the success of the course that both teachers and students receive sufficient training. Teachers received a two-hour training course in WIMBA from the university IT department (NET UEM). After receiving the training, the teachers set up workshops every day over a week-long period in order to practice using the software for the specific purposes intended as far as student learning outcomes. A practice run-through was done the last two days of workshop where teachers set up the technology to be used in a physical classroom and practiced teaching the material, while other teachers posed as students online and participated in a role play situation. This training was essential for teachers to work out possible technological glitches, and in fact, those teachers who attended fewer or no workshops made reference to the difficulties teaching through this method in their feedback comments (see results section of this paper). Students were also trained in using the WIMBA software through a walk-through tutorial video link and two documents for technical troubleshooting uploaded on the Moodle virtual classroom. On the first day of class, teachers went over questions and doubts, explained the main functions of the program, and did a brief simulation before actually starting to use WIMBA. Students did not report any doubts or problems

as far as understanding the software or using it.

The course covered the four skills in English language learning: listening, reading, speaking, and writing, with the bulk of the course focusing on listening, due to the fact that students had never been exposed to the Liverpool accent and had some difficulty understanding it. Vocabulary and grammar focused on points which would be of regular use once the students arrived at their destination. Writing was done purely face to face and was aimed at academic formats. The little student feedback received indicates less satisfaction with this part of the course, and it may be inferred that this may be in part due to the traditional approach given to this part of the course. Learning methodologies employed in the four skills areas included role plays, the Case Study Method, problem-based learning, and collaborative learning. The Case Study Method, problem-based learning and collaborative learning were particularly easy to adapt to this synchronous face to face/online format.

Students who attended in person were asked to bring laptops to class so as to be able to form groups with those students attending online. The general teaching method was to introduce a specific topic via a PowerPoint presentation or video on the collaborative blackboard to the class as a whole. Then students were assigned group tasks and placed into Breakout rooms comprised of a mix of in-person and online students. While in their rooms, students communicated via synchronous chat and collaborated on documents in real time. Afterwards, students were taken out of the Breakout rooms and asked to report back to the class. Students both in-class and on-line were asked to intervene, and on-line students could interrupt using the hand-up icon. Despite a few technical difficulties with interruptions and students being “kicked-out” of the program due to problems with their Internet coverage, the format worked quite well and was very similar to a 100% face to face format, with the particularity that it was necessary for the teacher to take some time establishing the Breakout rooms and making the necessary adjustments to group changes and information upload, which slightly slowed the pace of the class. Sessions were recorded thanks to a function in WIMBA which allows for such, and then posted on the virtual classroom in Moodle in MP3 and MP4 format, so that students who could not attend a specific day could catch up on what the class did at their own convenience.

5. RESULTS

Gathering results was a difficult task, as the course finished during the students' summer break, and it was difficult to locate students. Emails requesting feedback were sent to the 20 students and 5 responded (Annex 1). In addition, a detailed questionnaire was sent out and one was returned (Annex 2). The little data received showed that students were satisfied with this learning methodology and appreciated the flexibility offered by the class format. The high attendance rate for a voluntary summer course corroborates the high level of motivation on the part of the students (figure 2). Both on and off-campus students met their learning objectives and felt that the course prepared them to successfully complete their clinical internship in Liverpool. They made particular mention to the usefulness of the content, which focused on speaking and listening skills, local accents and cultural issues. There were some technical difficulties encountered that the students make reference to, but in all cases they place little

importance on them. The general feeling was positive and students were grateful for this opportunity.

As far as teacher feedback on the course, there were mixed opinions. One teacher found it “technologically challenging and restraining.” The format limited their ability to move around the classroom with freedom, as teachers had to be within view of the web cam. Another teacher mentioned “some technical difficulties with Internet connections” and recommended having a person available in the classroom to help with the technical set-up. The other two teachers “felt relatively comfortable using the technology”, but also mentioned some technical difficulties of the same nature. All the teachers agree that the pace of the class had to be slightly slower due to the dual format. As far as student outcomes and satisfaction regarding the course, all teachers perceived that it was very positive. Students were highly active and motivated and were grateful for the flexibility the course format offered.

6. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that a more in-depth study is needed with a greater pool of results in order to offer conclusive results as far as student satisfaction and outcomes with the course. Although the little data compiled corroborates the opinion of all four teachers as far as students being highly motivated by this format, interactive, enjoying the course, and reaching their learning objectives. Future research includes trying this synchronous face to face/online format in other types of non-language learning classes, such as university subjects or content courses. At UEM, WIMBA is generally used as an asynchronous communication tool. It would be interesting to compare the dual format to online-only and classroom-only formats and evaluate the results in order to offer more robust data. Another final area of interest for future research is student outcomes in this format as compared to strictly face to face or online formats.

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