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2020, Vol. 17 (2), 219-238(284)

revije.ff.uni-lj.si/elope

<https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.17.2.219-238>

UDC: 81'37.091.3

A Fully Integrated Approach to Blended Language Learning

ABSTRACT

In the face of increasing demand for greater continuity and flexibility in language learning, online learning has gradually established itself as an important complement to face-to-face (F2F) language instruction. Typically, the resulting blend focuses on the two central learning modes, i.e., F2F and online; however, it leaves out the self-study component based on sources that do not form an integral part of the online component. Recognising the importance of the latter, Whittaker (2014) defines blended language learning as a blend of F2F, online, and self-study components.

Drawing on this three-modal approach, the present paper first outlines two language courses designed and delivered by the author of the paper. Next, it analyses students' feedback on their experience with blended learning collected via an end-of-course questionnaire including multiple-choice statements, five-point Likert scale statements, and open-ended questions. The sample included fifty-two students, most of whom reported a positive experience, especially with the F2F component.

Keywords: blended language learning, continuity, fully integrated approach, three-modal approach

Celostni pristop h kombiniranemu jezikovnemu učenju

POVZETEK

Zaradi vse večje potrebe po kontinuiteti in fleksibilnosti pri jezikovnem učenju se računalniško podprto oziroma spletno učenje uveljavlja kot pomembna podpora jezikovnemu poučevanju in učenju v živo. Skladno z omenjenim kombinirano učenje praviloma temelji na kombinaciji učenja v živo in spletnega učenja, manj pozornosti pa posveča samostojnemu učenju, ki temelji na gradivih in virih, ki ne predstavljajo sestavnega dela spletne učne platforme. Zavedajoč se pomembnosti slednjega, Whittaker (2014) kombinirano jezikovno učenje definira kot kombinacijo učenja v živo, spletnega ter samostojnega učenja.

Izhajajoč iz omenjenega tri-modalnega koncepta kombiniranega jezikovnega učenja, pričujoči članek najprej predstavi dva tujejezikovna predmeta, ki ju je pripravila in izvedla avtorica članka. Nadalje empirični del članka analizira izkušnje študentov s kombiniranim učenjem. Mnenja študentov so bila pridobljena s pomočjo anonimnega vprašalnika, ki vključuje izjave izbirnega tipa, izjave z oceno po Likertovi lestvici (1–5) ter vprašanja odprtega tipa. Vzorec je zajemal 52 študentov, večina katerih poroča o pozitivni izkušnji, pri čemer še posebej izstopa učenje v živo.

Ključne besede: kombinirano jezikovno učenje, kontinuiteta, celostni pristop, trimodalni pristop

1 Introduction

Since the turn of the new millennium, online language instruction has become ubiquitous in foreign language instruction at all levels, especially in higher education and beyond, where it has primarily been used to enhance students' learning experience by providing greater continuity in the learning process and greater flexibility of learning in terms of time, pace, and place. Whereas the rationale and motivation for the early implementation of online language learning typically included reasons of a more practical nature, in recent years the focus has increasingly been shifting to pedagogy and language learning theories as the main motivation for its implementation, this approach frequently being labelled a "principled approach/way" (Whittaker 2014, 9). Rather than being exclusive of each other, these shifts in focus imply that none of the three main determiners of online language learning (i.e., technology with its practical implications, pedagogy, and language theories) really dominate, because each of them is important in its own right and "evolves and changes in its relationships with the others" (Garret 2009, 720). Since its early application in the 1960s, another vital shift has occurred in online language learning – namely the shift from its predominant use in distance learning to bridge the time and place gap between a teacher and student(s), to its increasingly frequent use in combination with face-to-face (F2F) instruction. This blended approach allows language teachers to select the best of both worlds (i.e., traditional and online teaching and learning methods), whereby the F2F and online components should seamlessly transition from one to another (Dewar and Whittington 2004). The importance of effective blending of F2F and online language instruction that is based on a dynamic relationship between technology and pedagogy (Garret 2009; Anderson and Dron 2012) is stressed by a number of authors, including Hinkelman (2018, ix–x), according to whom blended language instruction should be viewed as an ecology embedding a variety of F2F and digital technologies "into a process that is communicative and task-based".

Building on this view, this paper takes a holistic approach to exploring two blended ESP (i.e., English for Specific Purposes) courses, whereby the ultimate goal is to investigate and highlight the potential opportunities and challenges of the teaching and learning process. The two courses included in this study are ESP courses tailored to the needs of first-year undergraduate students at the University of Maribor's Faculty of Logistics. Resonating with the post-modernist view that the main goal of research in blended language learning is to investigate and reflect on blended classrooms as "ecosystems" of relations (Hinkelman 2018, 210), the study investigates and reflects on the blended language course components from both the teacher's and students' perspectives. Despite analysing a localised blended teaching and learning practice, this study provides insights that other teachers involved in blended language instruction can reflect on and apply to their own local environments.

The paper starts with an overview of some of the most relevant theoretical background and studies on blended language learning, through the prism of which it then outlines the two blended ESP courses tailored to the needs of logistics students and delivered in a blended format. Next, the empirical part analyses and discusses students' feedback on their experience with blended language learning. Finally, it concludes with an insight into the main lessons learned in the process, and practical implications of the findings.

The empirical research addresses the following three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Do students have a positive attitude toward the blended learning course?

This research question investigates whether students show a positive attitude toward the blended course as a whole. Related to this research question, two hypotheses are tested:

H.1.1 Gender affects students' attitudes toward blended learning.

H.1.2 Prior experience with online learning affects students' attitudes toward blended language learning.

RQ2: Do students show a preference for any of the three main components of the blended course?

This research question investigates whether students show a preference for an F2F, online, or self-study component. Related to this research question, the following two hypotheses are tested:

H.2.1 Gender affects students' preference for a chosen blended learning component.

H.2.2 Prior experience with online learning affects students' preference for a chosen blended learning component.

RQ3: Do students identify any overriding strengths or weaknesses of individual components?

This research question examines students' perceptions of the most prominent strengths and weaknesses of individual course components, which can provide important guidelines for the future redesign of the two courses.

2 The Blended Approach in Foreign Language Instruction

The early beginnings of the use of computer technology in foreign language instruction date back to the 1960s, when it was predominantly used for language learning based on “memorising [and repetition of] a body of well-choreographed responses” within the framework of Skinner’s behaviourist learning theory (Blake 2008, 49). Since then, online language learning has changed profoundly, mostly because of technological advancements and the development of new language learning theories. Relatively scant and rudimentary computer technology has advanced to ubiquitous, highly sophisticated e-learning platforms and networked technologies. Likewise, the repertoire of pedagogy has been enriched with new language-learning theories, typically including cognitivism, socio-constructivism (Holmes and Gardner 2006, 79), and more recently also connectivism (Whittaker 2014, 23–24). However, it should be noted that none of the “old” theories has been eliminated or replaced by the new one(s). Instead, all four approaches remain in use for their continuing value and effectiveness in a given learning context: a) behaviourism for its focus on repetition and automated response (Holmes and Gardner 2006); b) cognitivism for its focus on the mind and learning process (Holmes and Gardner 2006); c) socio-constructivism for its focus on the mind and social dimension of learning (Holmes and Gardner 2006); and d) connectivism

for its focus on “making [networked] connections with content, individuals and groups”, and applying them to problem solving (Anderson and Dron 2012, 8–9).¹ Furthermore, a growing number of authors advocate the complementarity rather than dominance or even exclusivity of certain pedagogies (Mehanna 2004; Holmes and Gardner 2006; Hinkelman 2018) as well as technologies, because the latter evolve through the incorporation of parts of earlier designs into new ones (Arthur 2009, as cited in Anderson and Dron 2012, 2). As a result, blended language learning today offers many opportunities for enhanced language teaching and learning, and it has become widely used and almost indispensable in foreign language instruction at all levels of education. The increasing popularity of a blended approach to teaching and learning has given rise to a number of names for it, with the two most frequently used being blended and/or hybrid learning. Although the two terms are frequently used interchangeably – as also advocated by Graham and Dziuban (2007), Grgurović (2017), and Hinkelman (2018) – it should be noted that there are also authors who claim that blended and hybrid learning represent two different concepts. As summarised by Whittaker (2013, 11–12), when the distinction is made, the two typically reflect the variety in percentages of online and F2F instruction in a blended course design, which could be further differentiated by extending the list with terms such as web-enhanced and fully online learning. Based on the postulate that the proportion between the two learning environments and their organisational structure largely depends on the nature of the course, here the terms blended learning and blended course are used as general terms for a course combining F2F and online learning regardless of the proportion between the course components.

The complexity and variety of the concept of blended learning are further reflected in a number of definitions, most of which focus on blending different modes of delivery and related teaching models and learning styles (Procter 2003), and stress the importance of the seamless transition between them (Dewar and Whittington 2004; Littlejohn and Pegler 2007) for effective and efficient learning. Most of these definitions focus on two modes – that is, face-to-face and online course delivery – thus elaborating on the two central components of a blended approach but leaving out the self-study component based on sources other than the ones forming an integral part of the e-learning platform. Recognising the importance of this third component, Whittaker (2013 and 2014) defines blended language learning as a blend of face-to-face, online, and self-study components. Because self-study components are an essential part of the two English for Logistics courses analysed in this study, this paper adopts Whittaker’s view.

3 The Teacher Perspective on a Blended Approach to ESP Teaching

Starting from the premise that because of the uniqueness of each teaching practice there is no “ideal ‘best practice’” that would fit all language teaching and learning situations (Hinkelman 2018, 2), this paper does not aim to present a generally applicable, i.e., one-size-fits-all, design of a blended ESP course. Instead, it reflects on challenges and opportunities experienced

¹ In contrast to behaviourism, cognitivism, and socio-constructivism, which “were developed in a time when learning was not impacted through technology” (Siemens 2005), connectivism has been developed in and for the digital age and thus inherently depends on networked technologies (Anderson and Dron 2012, 7–8).

by the author in her ten years of experience with blended ESP teaching, which could lead to the enhancement of the two ESP courses analysed and hopefully also prove useful to other language teachers planning to, or already using, a blended approach in their LSP (i.e., Languages for Specific Purposes) courses.

As explained above, the two English for Logistics courses discussed in this work are tailored to the needs of logistics students and follow Whittaker's three-modal view of blended learning (Whittaker 2013 and 2014). It should, however, be noted that they significantly contrast with the model introduced by Whittaker in two respects: first, by putting equal weight on all three components (i.e., face-to-face, online, and self-study), and second, by incorporating all three modes within one topic of the course. In Whittaker's model, the lead mode of the course developed for the military in Bosnia and Hercegovina (Whittaker 2013) was, for practical reasons, the face-to-face mode, whereby the three modes were introduced in consecutive blocks. Following the faculty's established course format, the two English for Logistics courses take as the point of departure the course syllabus, whereby the three blended learning components, as mentioned above, present an integral part of each topic. In line with the widely promoted guidelines for effective and efficient learning, according to which blended learning components should seamlessly transition from one to another and be linked by a common focus (Dewar and Whittington 2004; Littlejohn and Pegler 2007), the three components build on and complement each other. As proposed by Whittaker (2013, 19), individual components could be connected by topic, vocabulary, and/or grammar; in the two English for Logistics courses, individual components are linked by at least two if not all three of the mentioned course elements.

Typically, the introductory mode of both courses is F2F lectures, in which new topics and related language structures and functions are first introduced through discussion framed by verbal and visual cues in PPT slides, audio and/or video clips, and short texts. Further live discussion and practice are based on language exercises of various types included in handouts. By incorporating various types of learning activities, F2F lectures seek to include most, if not all, levels of Anderson and Krathwohl's revised model of Bloom's taxonomy;² that is, remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson and Dron 2012). Language structures and functions introduced in F2F lectures are further developed and practised by e-lectures designed as weekly e-quizzes and occasional e-tasks. The first usually include language exercises focusing on topic-related vocabulary and grammar in the form of gap-fill exercises (drop-down and type-in) and matching exercises (e.g., matching word pairs and matching words with their definitions), which are followed by more contextualised listening- and/or reading-based exercises. The latter are designed with the view of furthering students' knowledge and understanding of terminology and concepts through disciplinary content. E-quizzes round this off with an exercise explicitly assessing students' knowledge of key vocabulary by checking whether they can associate the words

² Bloom's model with six levels of cognitive processes (i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) has been widely used in educational practice. However, it is frequently criticised for its oversimplification of the nature of thought and its relationship to learning activities (Marzano and Kendall 2007). To compensate for this, Anderson and Krathwohl proposed a revised model that translates more easily into learning activities (Anderson and Dron 2012, 10).

they have learned with their native-language equivalents. To achieve this, students are given native-language equivalents of the new vocabulary covered in the previous exercises of the e-quiz, for which they are asked to provide the English terms. By incorporating these types of exercises, e-quizzes to some extent engage students in the first five levels of Anderson and Krathwohl's cognitive processes (i.e., remembering, understanding, applying, and analysing, but they leave out creating). Accordingly, to encourage more independent use of target-language structures, e-quizzes are occasionally complemented by e-tasks, in which students are involved in producing real-life outputs, the importance of which has also been stressed by Blake (2008, 39). The third (i.e., self-study) component is based on the independent study of course materials developed in-house and a supplementary commercial grammar book. For practical reasons, the first are uploaded onto an e-classroom; however, they do not form an integral part of it, and, unlike e-quizzes and e-tasks, they do not provide any feedback on students' performance, be it automatically generated (e-quizzes) or personalised feedback for each student (e-tasks). Instead, they include an answer key, allowing students to check their answers. Given the nature of the explanation and related exercises in these two sources, in the framework of Anderson and Krathwohl's model the self-study materials promote the development of the first five levels of cognitive processes. In sum, the three course components promote the first five levels of Anderson and Krathwohl's model to differing extents, and the creation process is included only in the F2F and online components. Translated into the four language learning theories (i.e., behaviourism, cognitivism, socio-constructivism, and connectivism), the two courses as a whole thus to some extent accommodate all four of them, with the focus being on the first three, which, as proposed by Anderson and Dron (2012), fit well with the first five levels of Anderson and Krathwohl's model.

As demonstrated above, the two English for Logistics courses are built around the F2F, online, and self-study components, with each of them playing an equally important role in the language teaching and learning process, and accordingly being allocated a proportionate amount of student learning time: F2F component 36 lessons, online component 24 lessons, and self-study component 120 lessons. However, it should be noted that the amount of time spent on F2F lessons is determined by the timetable, and is thus the same for all the students, whereas the time planned for the online and self-study components may vary from student to student because it largely depends on their General English competence and motivation for language learning. Compared to F2F lectures, the online and self-study components promote more "student-centered and student-autonomous" approaches to language instruction (Blake 2008, 127), in addition to offering the advantage of independent and self-paced study. Accordingly, the balance in the two courses is in favour of students' independent and autonomous learning, which fits well with the fact that they have been developed for tertiary-level students, who should have already developed a relatively high degree of learning autonomy. Related to this, it should be stressed that, however independent and autonomous students may be, they are still likely to benefit from proper teacher guidance, the benefits of which have also been highlighted by Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006, 75), according to whom "minimally guided instruction is less effective and less efficient than the instructional approaches that place a strong emphasis on guidance of the student learning process". As further explained by the authors, the need for guidance only lessens when students have gained "sufficiently high prior knowledge to provide 'internal' guidance"

(2006, 75). Accordingly, given the fact that the two language courses analysed in this study are designed for first-year students, who have mixed experience of both English for Specific Purposes and online language learning, explicit guidelines are given for all activities forming an integral part of the online component of both courses.

Of the three components, the online teaching and learning component has been around for a relatively short period of time, especially when compared to F2F and self-study language instruction, and it thus deserves further attention. In online language instruction, a number of commercial and open-source Course Management Systems, or e-learning platforms, have been developed over the last two decades in response to the increasing popularity of technology-enhanced instruction. One of them is Moodle, which has been used as the Faculty of Logistics' official course management system and thus also for English for Logistics courses. Moodle was released in 2002 and originally dedicated to the academic environment (Dodun et al. 2015, 245). The design of this platform largely draws on the principles of constructivism; that is, the idea that people can learn best by "involvement and experiences" (Educational Platforms online, as cited in Dodun et al. 2015, 245). Accordingly, as suggested by Chowdhry, Sieler, and Alwis (2014, 13), the use of Moodle and other e-learning platforms promotes a "deep learning approach" that can improve students' academic performance. As for the features promoting deep learning, they typically include discussion forums which play a vital role in building "a sense of online community" (Hockly and Clanfield 2010, as cited in Whittaker 2014, 14), assessment tools, as well as tools for sharing individualised feedback, easy monitoring of students' submissions, uploading of course materials, and tools for the inclusion of links to authentic online sources (online texts, audio and video clips, and online dictionaries). The two English for Logistics courses take advantage of all these features to provide students with an enhanced language-learning experience as well as additional stimulus and motivation for keeping pace with the course progress. In pursuit of this goal, the automatic generation of feedback for e-quizzes has proved especially important because, in addition to providing feedback on the accuracy of the answers submitted, it allows students to continue working on the quiz until they have reached the desired percentage of accuracy. Here, it should be noted that to pass a quiz students need to score 60% or higher, this also being one of the prerequisites for taking the written exam. As argued by Whittaker (2014, 12), unless assessed, online work is typically not considered an integral part of the course and is treated as optional rather than compulsory, which is also the reason why successful completion of quizzes is deemed a prerequisite for taking the written exam.

As presented above, blended language teaching confronts language teachers with several challenges, with one of them being the challenge of continuously adapting their teaching practices to changes in pedagogy, language learning theories, and online technologies. Two other key factors for continuous course development are a teacher's reflection on their teaching practice and students' feedback on their satisfaction with the learning process. Accordingly, the empirical part of the paper analyses the results of the questionnaire on students' experience with blended language learning in the framework of the two English for Logistics courses. Following a rich body of research on the potential influence of gender (Mehanna 2004; Muilenburg and Berge 2005; Shea et al. 2019) and prior e-learning experience (Brown 2001;

Muilenburg and Berge 2005; Nikitenko 2009; Shea et al. 2019) on the students' uptake of and satisfaction with the fully online or blended approach to language learning, the present study investigates students' satisfaction with the course as a whole, as well as its three components in relation to these two factors.

4 Methods and Materials

Building on the view that blended language learning is defined by “both an implicit change agenda and a desire to maintain continuity with useful practices of the past”³ (Hinkelman 2018, 228), this small-scale study investigates and reflects on useful practices and opportunities for improvement in the two English for Logistics courses. Following these goals, after ten years of using the blended learning approach, during which the course has been constantly improved based on the teacher's reflection and brief feedback from students on their experience with the course, this study analyses more comprehensive feedback on students' experience with blended learning in the English for Logistics courses delivered in the academic year 2018/2019.

To elicit more comprehensive feedback, the author designed an anonymous, hard-copy questionnaire including multiple choice statements, five-point Likert scale statements, and open-ended questions. The decision to have an anonymous questionnaire was based on the fact that anonymous methods promote more honest and greater disclosure (Murdoch et al. 2014) of students' opinions. Given the purpose of the study, the benefit of this outweighs the possible insight into the correlation between students' success in the course (i.e., their academic performance) and their course satisfaction that a non-anonymous questionnaire could offer.

The questionnaire consisted of twenty-one items divided into the following three parts:

- a) The first part elicited students' background information, including gender and prior language learning experience (i.e., type of language course in secondary school: General English or English for Specific Purposes, materials used during lectures, materials used for self-study, and information on whether the course incorporated an online component).
- b) The second part focused on the English for Logistics blended course. It combined five-point Likert scale statements about students' satisfaction with the course and its components (ranging from 1 = poorly satisfied to 5 = very satisfied) with open-ended questions inviting students to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each course component.
- c) The third part, in which students were invited to give their suggestions for the course, did not relate directly to this study and is therefore excluded from the ensuing analysis and discussion.

³ Whereas Hinkelman (2018) explains stability in terms of teachers' and researchers' aversion to advanced technology and the attempt to change their attitude toward language learning technology, and defines change in terms of the introduction of thoroughly integrated F2F aspects into the teaching practices of computer-oriented teachers and researchers, here the terms are restricted to blended learning practice based on the already balanced relationship between pedagogy and technology. Accordingly, stability refers to practices perceived as efficient by both the teacher and students, and change is used for practices perceived as less efficient by either the teacher or students or both, thus calling for changes.

The questionnaire was administered to fifty-five first-year undergraduate students in English for Logistics courses during the last lectures for the course. Because three of the students gave incomplete answers to one or more questions, their responses were excluded from the analysis. The results of the remaining fifty-two questionnaires are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Analysis of students' responses first focused on their background information elicited through multiple-choice statements. Next, the mean and median values were determined for the five-point Likert scale statements. To check whether there were any differences based on gender or prior experience in students' satisfaction with the course as a whole or with any of its three components, an independent samples *t*-test was performed. For this test, the significance threshold was set at $p = 0.05$, and *p*-values between 0.1 and 0.05 were interpreted as values showing only a tendency toward a statistically significant difference. The statistical analysis was performed with the statistical programme SPSS 24.0. Finally, the students' open-ended responses on the strengths and weaknesses of individual course components were submitted to quantitative analysis, including manual coding⁴ and categorising into the main thematic categories that emerged from the data.

5 Results and Discussion

This part of the paper describes the questionnaire results and observations. It starts with an analysis of the students' background information, the results of which are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Students' background information.

Gender	male	27 51.9%	female	25 48.1%		
Sec. school Eng. course	GE	25 48.1%	ESP	27 51.9%		
Sec. school F2F materials	printed	35 67.3%	electronic	1 1.9%	combination	16 30.8%
Sec. school self-study materials	printed	37 71.2%	electronic	1 1.9%	combination	14 26.9%
Sec. school e-classroom	no	47 90.4%	yes	5 9.6%	online activities (3x) course timetable (2x) HW instructions (4x) add. study materials (3x) forum discussions (1x)	

As shown in Table 1, the split between male and female students is 27 to 25, thus roughly equal. Regarding the students' prior language learning experience, the results indicate that almost half of the students (48.1%) studied General English (GE) in secondary school, and just over half (51.9%) studied English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Regarding materials used

⁴ Manual rather than software-based coding and categorizing techniques were used because the manual techniques better fit the purpose of searching for emerging patterns in a relatively small database (Yin 2011).

during F2F lectures, most of the students (67.3%) indicated that the only form used was printed materials, which was followed by a combination of F2F and electronic materials (30.8%), and only one student (1.9%) indicated the exclusive use of electronic materials. Not surprisingly, the numbers for the type of materials used for self-study are similar, with the difference being a slightly higher use of printed materials (indicated by 71.2% of students) and a slightly lower use of a combination of printed and online materials (indicated by 26.9%). Furthermore, the questionnaire also investigated whether English courses in secondary school used an e-classroom. Quite surprisingly, the results show that only five out of fifty-two students had such a course, with only three of these five students having used an e-classroom for completing language exercises and tasks; that is, online activities. Other uses included receiving information on the course timetable (indicated by two students), receiving homework instructions (four students), accessing additional study materials (three students), and participating in forum discussions (one student). To sum up, the results for students' background information show that before joining the course only a small portion of students had relatively limited experience with online learning, thus confirming the need for initial training, continuous support and guidance because most students are novices or relative novices in blended learning.

TABLE 2. Students' satisfaction with the course and its components.

How satisfied were you with	1	2	3	4	5	mean and median values
the course as a whole?	1	1	4	25	21	mean: 4.2 median: 4
F2F lectures?	0	0	4	22	26	mean: 4.4 median: 4.5
e-lectures?	0	1	2	25	24	mean: 4.4 median: 4
self-study materials?	1	1	6	22	22	mean: 4.2 median: 4

Levels of satisfaction: 1 = poorly satisfied, 2 = slightly satisfied, 3 = moderately satisfied, 4 = well satisfied, 5 = very satisfied

The next questionnaire section focused on the blended language course that students took as part of their first year of undergraduate studies, and it elicited students' feedback on their satisfaction with the course as a whole and each of its three components via five-point Likert scale statements. As presented in Table 2, the analysis of students' responses yielded slight or no differences in mean values, with all four of them ranging between 4.2 and 4.4. In light of the first two research questions (i.e., whether students have a positive attitude toward the blended learning course as a whole and whether they show a preference for any of its three main components), the fact that the mean value for students' satisfaction with the course as a whole is 4.2 (out of 5) indicates that students have a positive attitude toward the two language courses. Furthermore, the results also indicate the preference for F2F lectures, which are the only component yielding a median (average) value higher than 4 (F2F median = 4.5). This students' bias here comes as no surprise, given the fact

that F2F lectures were the dominant learning mode in their secondary education as well as being the generally preferred learning mode in language learning, which, as Blake (2008, 1) puts it, has predominantly been viewed as “such a social, if not face-to-face, process”. Further comparison of the four mean and median values revealed some other interesting findings, including the same mean value for the course as a whole and self-study materials (mean=4.2) on the one hand, and the same mean value for F2F and e-lectures (4.4) on the other. Taken together, these similarities and differences could imply that students have a preference for some scaffolding and guidance over complete autonomy and self-reliance in language learning, the former two forming an integral part of F2F lectures and e-lectures, and the latter two representing the central features of the self-study component. The value and importance of ongoing guidance and support from the teacher have been addressed by various authors on blended learning, including Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006, 75), Rosen (2009, 65–66), and Hirst and Godfrey (2013, 108). As for the same mean value (mean = 4.2) for the course as a whole and the self-study component, it could be speculated that the students’ attitudes toward the latter affect the overall level of course satisfaction, the latter being (slightly) lower than the level of satisfaction with F2F and e-lectures (mean = 4.4). The role of the study materials provided online has also been investigated by Chowdhry, Sieler, and Alwis (2014, 12). Their study on the impact of technology-enhanced learning on student academic performance yielded results suggesting that the complimentary use of study materials accessible through an e-learning platform and interactive online activities can improve students’ academic achievement in blended learning models. Given the potential role of the self-study component based on the materials provided online and the materials’ potential lack of ongoing guidance and support from the teacher, future research into the two ESP courses included in the present study could test the validity of speculations about the role of the self-study component in students’ satisfaction with the course as a whole through student interviews. Because this would exceed the scope of this study, it is tested here against students’ feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of individual blended learning components.

To check whether there are any gender- or prior experience-based differences in the students’ attitudes toward the blended language course as a whole or any of its three components, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The results of the statistical analysis are presented in Table 3. They show that *p*-values range between 0.266 and 0.976, thus negating all four hypotheses on potential differences based on gender and prior experience:

H.1.1 Gender affects students’ attitudes toward blended learning.

H.1.2 Prior experience with online learning affects students’ attitudes toward blended language learning.

H.2.1 Gender affects students’ preference for a chosen blended learning component.

H.2.2 Prior experience with online learning affects students’ preference for a chosen blended learning component.

TABLE 3. Gender- and prior experience-based differences.

	mean	mean	p-value
Course satisfaction_gender	male_mean: 4.3	female_mean: 4.2	0.800
Course satisfaction_prior experience	no exp._mean: 4.2	yes exp._mean: 4.4	0.637
F2F lect. satisfaction_gender	male_mean: 4.5	female_mean: 4.3	0.266
F2F lect. satisfaction_prior experience	no exp._mean: 4.4	yes exp._mean: 4.6	0.519
e-Lectures_gender	male_mean: 4.4	female_mean: 4.4	0.874
e-Lectures_prior experience	no exp._mean: 4.4	yes exp._mean: 4.2	0.517
Self-study material_gender	male_mean: 4.2	female_mean: 4.2	0.976
Self-study material_prior experience	no exp._mean: 4.2	yes exp._mean: 4.2	0.928

As for the reasons why the results show no gender-based differences, it could be speculated that there are simply no significant differences between female and male students regarding their attitudes toward the course as a whole or its components. As pointed out by Shea et al. (2019, 73), these results may also be due to small-sample research, which, as they suggest, is less likely to show gender-biased differences. Relatedly, in their large-scale, cross-institutional study (n=2,036) on developing an online learning community, they report small but potentially relevant gender differences which may imply that in online settings female students learn more⁵, experience more satisfaction and fewer technical problems, as well as engage in more interaction with their peers and teachers than their male counterparts (Shea et al. 2019). Likewise, Muilenburg and Zane (2005, 35–38), in their large-scale (n=1,056) study on student barriers to online learning, observe that gender is one of ten factors affecting student ratings of barriers to online learning. The other nine factors researched in their study being ability and confidence with online learning technology, effectiveness of online learning, online learning enjoyment, online courses completed, the likelihood of taking a future online course, age, ethnicity, and learning institution. A rich body of research on gender-based differences also gives examples of studies yielding no evidence for such differences, one such work being Mehanna's (2004, 287–88) small-scale study (n=200) on the pedagogic aspect of online learning in higher education. Similarly, in Koohang and Durante's (2003) small-scale study (n=106) on learner's perceptions of the web-based distance learning activities in a hybrid programme, gender does not show as a significant factor in learners' perceptions. Given the mixed results of the previous studies and small sample size, a lack of evidence for gender-based differences thus comes as no surprise. Conversely, the fact that the results also show no statistically significant difference based on prior e-learning experience is somewhat contrary to expectations and, could be ascribed to the low number of students (five out of fifty-two) with limited secondary-school experience with online learning (see Table 2). In light of the previous research on the potential impact of prior e-learning experience, much of which did observe a positive correlation between prior experience and the level

⁵ Along these lines, Albert and Johnson in their study on socioeconomic- and gender-based differences in students' perceptions of e-learning observe that compared to their male counterparts female students "perceive e-learning systems as providing more control in their learning progress and over the materials they wish to learn" (2011, 429).

of students' satisfaction with blended or fully online course (e.g. Brown 2001; Muilenburg and Berge 2005), the results yielded by the present work are more in line with those studies that did not observe such evidence (e.g. Nikitenko 2009; Shea et al. 2019). Based on the findings of the relevant studies and given the small sample size and percentage of students with prior experience included in the present study, further research is needed to check the influence of prior experience on students' satisfaction with the blended learning course and its components. Accordingly, future studies could include the aforementioned student interviews, which could shed more light on the matter.

The final part of the study focuses on the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the three course components (i.e., F2F lectures, e-lectures, and self-study component) as perceived by the students. The students' responses, which were given in the form of open-ended statements, were carefully examined and compared against each other to spot emerging patterns, based on which they were grouped into thematic categories. Because some of the students gave responses including more than one theme, such responses were divided into thematic units, which were then included in respective thematic categories. The most frequently given responses are listed in Table 4.

The analysis of students' responses first of all shows that the numbers of responses on the strengths of individual components (ranging between fifty-one and thirty-four) significantly outnumber the numbers of responses on the weaknesses (ranging between twenty-one and eight), thus resonating with the finding that students show a positive attitude toward the course as a whole as well as its components. Furthermore, it can be observed that a significant number of the reported strengths reflect the generally perceived benefits of blended learning, whereas the reported weaknesses seem to be of more personal relevance. Accordingly, a closer look at the listed strengths of F2F lectures shows that the most frequently mentioned benefits include a good explanation of the course content (13×), the possibility to ask questions for clarification (11×), and teacher-student interaction (7×), with all of them focusing on the social nature of F2F lectures, the importance of which has also been addressed by Blake (2008, 1), who suggests that a common perception of language learning is as a predominantly "social, if not face-to-face, process". A brief overview of the most frequently mentioned strengths of e-lectures – that is, reviewing the content covered in F2F lectures (15×), continuity in learning (10×), language practice (9×), and flexibility and independence of learning (6×) – also shows that students value the benefits of online learning commonly addressed and described by a growing body of relevant studies (e.g., Blake 2008; Al-Mahrooqi and Troudi 2014; Benta, Bologa, Dzitac, and Dzitac 2015; Rodríguez 2016), one of them being the study by Tomlinson (2013, 221), who points out the advantage of providing additional "opportunities for exposure, discovery and use" of the content covered in F2F lectures in a less teacher-dependent and more "self-reliant" way. Similar evidence for the benefits of online learning can be found in Fleet (2013, 204), who, based on students' feedback on their experience of blended learning, observes that the vital benefits of the inclusion of an online component are "flexibility, provision for different learning styles, increased collaborative opportunities and greater independent study potential". Furthermore, the author explains that in order to exploit the full potential of these benefits, there should be a clear link between topics and skills covered in F2F and online components, whereby online activities should

TABLE 4. Strengths and weakness of blended learning components.

F2F lectures	<p>STRENGTHS (51 responses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – (Good) explanation of the course content (13×) – Asking questions for clarification (11×) – Teacher-student communication (7×) – Practice based on handouts (6×) – Practising pronunciation (6×) – Better knowledge retention (4×) – Practising listening skills (3×) – Additional native-language explanation (3×) – Student-student cooperation (3×) <p>WEAKNESSES (14 responses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Student presentations (3×) – Progress too fast (2×) – Timing of breaks (2×)
e-Lectures	<p>STRENGTHS (50 responses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reviewing the content covered in F2F lectures (15×) – Continuity in learning (10×) – Language practice (9×) – Flexibility in place and/or time of learning (6×) – Independent learning (6×) – Instant feedback (3×) – Enough time for completion (3×) – Complement F2F lectures (3×) <p>WEAKNESSES (21 responses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – (Near) synonyms not accepted as correct answers (3×) – Too much work (3×) – Do not offer answers (3×) – Based on the study of additional sources (2×) – Open for a limited time (2×) – Possibility of copying answers from other students (2×)
Self-study component	<p>STRENGTHS (34 responses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Good for learning and practice (10×) – Covering the complete course content (8×) – Clear and well-structured (7×) – Accessibility (5×) <p>WEAKNESSES (8 responses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Too extensive (2×) – Answer key to exercises is not given (2×)

“add value by compensating for the limitations of the classroom” (Fleet 2013, 205). Last but not least, the students’ responses on the self-study component show that its most important strengths are language practice and well-structured presentation of the content, with both of them also being highlighted as an important advantage of F2F and e-lectures, thus being important overriding advantages of the course as a whole. Conversely, the responses on the weaknesses of individual components, as already mentioned, do not show any overriding weaknesses and thus seem to reflect more personal views, some of which indicate areas for

which more detailed instruction could prove useful (e.g., information about the relevance of focusing on the chosen disciplinary vocabulary instead of synonyms and near-synonyms, which may better fit more general settings), whereas some others could be considered when planning the redesign of the course (e.g., the time for completing e-quizzes).

6 Concluding Remarks

The results of this small-scale study show that students participating in the two English for Logistics courses have positive attitudes toward the course as a whole as well as its components, especially F2F lectures. Regarding gender- and prior experience-based differences, further analysis of students' responses shows no statistically relevant differences, which is why, given the sample size and percentage of students with prior experience with online learning, further evidence that could be collected through student interviews would be needed to either support or reject these results. Furthermore, because the three most frequently reported strengths of online learning are reviewing the content covered in F2F lectures, continuity in learning, and language practice, future research could also examine how students' participation in online activities and their attitude toward it affects their academic performance. The potential impact of online learning on students' academic performance has also been addressed by a number of authors, including Ellis, Greaney, and Macdonald (2007) and Chowdhry, Sieler, and Alwis (2014). Both studies provide evidence for a positive relation between students' participation in online activities and their academic performance, with an important additional insight of Chowdhry, Sieler, and Alwis (2014, 13) being that online learning may positively affect students' final marks only when it is based on "innovative learning activities" promoting a deep learning approach. However, to elicit information on students' final marks for the course, in the case of the present study, which involved first-year students, who completed the questionnaire before taking the written exam, this would require the inclusion of their names, based on which the students' responses could later be compared against their academic performance. Because this would make the questionnaire non-anonymous and could thus affect students' honesty in their feedback, the drawbacks outweigh the potential benefit that the insight into the correlation between the students' attitudes toward the course and their academic performance could bring. This direction of research, however, seems a viable option for the second-year students, who could be asked to list their final mark for the first-year English for Logistics course, the inclusion of which would not compromise the anonymity of the questionnaire.

This study also showed that teacher-student communication in the e-classroom is more or less limited to the teacher's posts on the course, individualised teacher feedback on e-tasks, and students' occasional messages and responses to the teacher's posts and feedback. Accordingly, one of the challenges for future enhancement of the online component of the course is the inclusion of more teacher-student communication as well as peer-to-peer communication and collaboration, the importance of which has been addressed by several authors, including Swan (2003), Kerres and de Witt (2003), King and Arnold (2012). This focus would also pave the way for better alignment with connectivism as the pedagogy of the digital age and its focus on building "[networked] connections with content, individuals and groups" (Anderson and Dron 2012, 7–9).

To conclude, as evidenced in the relevant literature and supported by the results of this study, a blended language learning approach offers several advantages, including enhanced and enriched student contact with the target language (Blake 2008, 2; Chowdhry, Sieler, and Alwis 2014, 3) through a “facilitated, networked approach to knowledge sharing and learning” (Bielawski and Metcalf 2005, 136). Or, as argued by Pusack and Otto, technology-enhanced learning, and thus also blended language learning based on e-learning platforms such as Moodle, promotes deep learning “through presentation of content of different types linked together in meaningful ways” (Pusack and Otto 1997, as cited in Otto 2017, 17). This approach to language learning can enhance either large-scale General English courses or English for Specific Purposes courses. The latter are typically tailored to “the communicative needs and practices” of smaller, more specialised groups of students (Hyland 2007, 391) and demand highly specialised activities and study materials that are constantly updated in line with current disciplinary developments. Accordingly, the blended format seems especially well-suited for this task because online learning environments provide a dynamic and flexible medium for language teaching and learning through disciplinary content (Garrett 2009).

As indicated at the outset of the paper, the main goal of the study reported in this paper was to evaluate and reflect on the current English for Logistics courses for the first-year students, the findings of which could serve as a starting point for their further development. Although focusing on a local educational setting, a small sample of students and only two factors that could affect students’ satisfaction with the course, i.e., gender and prior experience, the insights and findings presented in this work are also expected to prove useful to other teachers and researchers using and/or studying a blended approach to foreign language instruction.

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Appendix: Student Questionnaire

Professional logistics terminology and communication in English 1

2018/2019

Gender: a) male b) female

First, please fill in the information on your English instruction in secondary school.

In secondary school I studied: a) General English b) English for Specific Purposes

In secondary school, the materials used in F2F lectures were:

- a) printed materials
- b) electronic materials
- c) a combination of printed and electronic materials

In secondary school, the materials used for self-study were:

- a) printed materials
- b) electronic materials
- c) a combination of printed and electronic materials

In secondary school, the English course was supported by an e-classroom: a) no b) yes

If your answer to the previous question was “yes,” please circle the corresponding answer(s) below and/or add additional options.

The e-classroom was used for:

- a) uploading the course timetable
- b) uploading homework instructions
- c) forum discussions
- d) uploading additional course materials
- e) chatroom communication
- f) completing language exercises and tasks
- g) other: _____

Below, please give your feedback on blended learning in the course Professional logistics terminology and communication in English 1.

Answers: 1 = poorly satisfied; 2 = slightly satisfied; 3 = moderately satisfied; 4 = well satisfied; 5 = very satisfied

1. How satisfied were you with the course as a whole? 1 2 3 4 5

2. How satisfied were you with face-to-face lectures? 1 2 3 4 5

a) Could you point out any strengths of face-to-face lectures?

.....

b) Could you point out any weaknesses of face-to-face lectures?

.....

3. How satisfied were you with e-lectures? 1 2 3 4 5

a) Could you point out any strengths of e-lectures?

.....

b) Could you point out any weaknesses of e-lectures?

.....

4. How satisfied were you with the *English for Logistics 1* 1 2 3 4 5

self-study materials?

a) Could you point out any strengths of self-study materials?

.....

b) Could you point out any weaknesses of self-study materials?

.....

5. YOUR SUGGESTIONS

Please give your suggestions for the future development of the course.

.....