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## COMPARISON OF TWO MODES OF LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES BY MEDICAL BACHELORS

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**Abstract:** The article aims at making a comparison between two modes of learning English for Specific Purposes—online and blended ones. Teaching specialized English to students at university has always been both challenging and rewarding as it strives to prepare the future specialists for the competitive environment of the Common European market. English for Specific Purposes and its subfield, English for Academic purposes involves a complex network of intertwined components such as problem and task-based language learning, project-driven learning, communicatively oriented learning etc. It requires the usage of many and diverse teaching methods, starting from a change of teaching paradigm – the old *ex cathedra* method of information provision, typical of traditional approaches, is superseded by a new one, that of the teacher-manager. The new classroom environment necessitates a more individual approach to teaching and a more task-based learning. Students are guided towards working on their own and catering to their own needs in language acquisition. This completely new methodology of English for Specific Purposes was put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic when physical contact was avoided for fear of being infected and that entailed a completely new way of teacher-student interaction – distant mode learning. Teachers and students alike were forced into this type of learning mode and it definitely showed significant advantages and unthought-of benefits which would not have transpired should the epidemic had not broken out. Two years later with the epidemic of COVID -19 over, the educational establishments all across Europe had gone back to physical attendance, but not without a heated debate over the two modes of learning juxtaposition. Many practitioners and researchers denounced online learning as ill-conceived and handicapping, but there were voices that stood in defense of this type of learning. This paper strives to contribute to this debate by analyzing the results from two consecutive academic years in which learning was done in completely different ways – the first one was in distant learning mode, as the epidemic was raging during that timeframe, while in the second normal, physical attendance was reintroduced due to the end of the pandemic. This return to “normality” did not entail restoration of the old traditional approaches to learning but the incorporation of “blended” learning, a methodology that makes the best use of the old and the new. Blended learning has been around for some time and it insists on the extended use of technology, including tools such as interactive boards, internet-based platforms such as Moodle, Teams, Google Classroom, and approaches such as problem and task-based learning, project-based learning etc. The results from the research show unequivocally that face-to-face interaction in physical presence does not have an alternative yet in terms of effectiveness as far as the speaking skills are concerned. Other skills such as reading, listening and writing proved to be effectively acquired both in distant mode and in physical presence mode of learning. As a whole, blended learning, which involves a great deal of online interaction, proves to be the most efficient way of acquisition in the course in English for Specific Purposes.

**Keywords:** ESP, online learning, blended learning, comparison, medical bachelors

### 1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has always been one of the most challenging approaches to English language teaching (Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 2009, Dagnev, 2022). This method of learning includes elements of communicative language learning, problem-based language learning, project-based learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and many other teaching approaches. An additional challenge to ESP can be the very mode of learning. For students of ESP at the Medical College of the Medical University in Plovdiv, the academic 2020/2021 was completely carried out in distance learning mode. The next year, due to the waning of the pandemic, the students went back to the “real” classrooms. For the researcher in ESP, it is of utmost interest to find out how these two different modes of learning compare. The investigations can start from adopting some prior suppositions and theoretical approaches regarding teaching English for academic purposes (EAP) and teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Both fields of educational methodology apply several methods and approaches including Internet based ones, aiming at achieving high levels of acquisition of language skills (Welch & Napoleon, 2015, Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). The use of technologies and the Internet in particular present new ways of searching for motivation growth (Joshi & Kaur, 2011). In its turn, physical attendance can also be highly technological if the particular classroom methodology relies on new technological tools such as multimedia, internet-based platforms and the concomitant methods employing such a techno-savvy approach.

The use of the Internet introduces new avenues of reclaiming motivation territory (Mike, 1996). The so-called *blended learning* has arisen as a new and significant educational trend. Bonk and Graham (2012) describe blended learning as the combination of traditional face-to-face instruction with computer-assisted instruction, combining both types of learning as traditional classroom lecture and online learning are used in the teaching and learning process (Graham, 2006, Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, Akbarov et al, 2018, Dagnev, 2019). Neumeier (2005:164) defines the most important aim of blended learning as finding the most effective and efficient combination of the two modes of learning for the individual learning subjects, contexts and objectives. Marsh (2012) states that the use of blended learning could provide many benefits to language learners over traditional teaching approaches. Some of these benefits include developing language learners' autonomy, providing more individualized language support, increasing students' interaction and engagement, providing opportunities to practice the language beyond the class settings etc.

On the other hand, online learning has also gained momentum as some students are interested in taking a foreign language, but cannot fit one in their schedule. Online courses are expected to be mostly asynchronous, and so that the attendants should be able to learn at their own pace to a much greater extent than in the regular classroom course (Dagnev, 2021a). It is beyond doubt that among the advantages of online learning are the extended access to materials, greater variety of modes of presentation of new information, flexible timetables, the elimination of time spent in physically changing the location, less stress etc.

In line with these developments, research has been burgeoning on the matter of the coronavirus – induced provision of educational services. Fatima (2020) analyzes the challenges and opportunities of ELT in times of the pandemic, while Ashmara (2020) studies WhatsApp as a means of communication and educational tool. In their turn, Novawan et al (2021) investigate students' experiences of online English language learning by using YouTube and Dagnev (2021a) explores students' attitudes in relation to online teaching in times of COVID-19.

The study aims at analyzing the students' success rate in mastering the intended course skills in relation to the mode of teacher-student interaction. Two modes are in focus – blended learning and online learning.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to gauge the success level of each mode the research evaluates the students' performance in the span of two academic years, 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. The sample includes four groups of students, two in the 2020/2021 and two in the 2021/2022 academic years, respectively. All students were in their first year of study from the specialty of "Assistant-pharmacist" at the Medical College of the Medical University in Plovdiv. The course of study was two semesters for each group. There were 28 students in the abovementioned specialties in 2020/2021 academic year and 30 students in 2021/2022 academic year. A diagnostic test to determine the entrance level was performed. It was designed to ascertain whether the students were able to perform at B1/B2 levels by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). A performance level from 50% to 70% accounted for B1 level and from 70% to 100% for B2 level. The test gauged both General English vocabulary and grammar at the abovementioned levels.

During the semester, all the students studied specialized English for healthcare purposes. In the first year, when learning was carried out only in online mode, the students covered various materials both in text and in video form, related to healthcare occupations and relevant to their specialty. Most text materials were taken from "English for Healthcare Professionals: A Coursebook for the Medical Colleges" by Dagnev (preprint copy). The grammar and vocabulary were all at B1/B2 level according to CEFR. In the second year, physical attendance was reintroduced, while learning was largely done in a blended fashion. The syllabus was entirely based on the newly published textbook "English for Healthcare Professionals: A Coursebook for the Medical Colleges" by Dagnev (2021b). Apart from this textbook, the students were shown video files, regarding specialized topics and vocabulary. They also presented certain grammatical points and lexical units on their own.

The course itself evaluated the students' performance both during the semesters and at end of the second semester. For that purpose, the students did three current tests on covered units from the syllabus, as well as a final test at the examination session. The current tests were done in written fashion while the final test was in both written and oral fashion. The students' performance in class was also taken into consideration. The students from all groups in either year did the same tests. They were examined orally in a similar way, barring the fact that in 2020/2021 academic year, the examinations were done online via Microsoft's "Teams".

The current tests were focused respectively on these topics:

- Current test 1: General knowledge about healthcare, hospitals, staff – related vocabulary tested. Grammar: tenses, articles, prepositions, word order (compound sentences)
- Current test 2: Knowledge about illness and disease – related vocabulary. Grammar: tenses, word formation (medical suffixes and prefixes), word order (complex sentences)

- Current test 3: Knowledge about the specialty – related vocabulary. Grammar: tenses, modality, plural forms (medical terms), passives.

The oral examinations in both years included one-to-one teacher – student interaction based on students’ free turns on specific specialty related topics in the space of two minutes and follow-up questions related to the topic of the free turn.

### 3. RESULTS

The results from the tests and performance are shown in tabular form.

**Table 1. Results from the diagnostic tests in 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic years.**

	Number of students	Students’ score: less than 50%	Students’ score: 50% - 70%	Students’ score: 70% -100%
Academic year 2020/2021	28	-	18	10
Academic year 2021/2022	30	-	16	14

The results presented in Table 1 show similar levels of foreign language competence in the groups at base. All students were up to the requirements for course eligibility. There is a slight difference in output in favour of the students from 2021/2022 academic year, which is not statistically relevant.

**Table 2. Performance of students on current tests during the semesters.**

	Number of students	Students’ score: less than 50%	Students’ score: 50% - 70%	Students’ score: 70% -100%
Academic year 2020/2021	28			
• Current test 1		6	18	4
• Current test		4	18	6
• Current test		5	20	5
Academic year 2021/2022	30			
• Current test		8	20	2
• Current test		5	18	7
• Current test		5	16	9

As we can see from the in-the-academic-year performance, all students found it comparatively difficult at first to adapt to learning specialized grammar and vocabulary. Current test 1, which features mostly general healthcare topics, seems to have been the most challenging of all. When we analyze the results from the other two current tests, we can observe that there is a marked difference with regard to Current test 3, which targets the specialty itself.

**Table 3. Performance of students on final test.**

	Number of students	Students’ score: less than 50%		Students’ score: 50% - 70%		Students’ score: 70% -100%	
		Written	Oral	Written	Oral	written	Oral
Academic year 2020/2021	28	-	4	14	20	14	4
Academic year 2021/2022	30	-	-	18	16	12	14

Table 3 shows manifestly that physical attendance is definitely more beneficial in acquiring the skill of speaking. As can be seen all students from 2021/2022 academic year performed strongly in the oral exams, which were held face-to-face. As far as the written test is concerned, it seems that the mode of learning does not affect the level of performance much, with the students from the fully online course faring even slightly better.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The results clearly show that in terms of written performance there is not a great difference between the groups with respect to mode of learning. Here, we should account for some specific traits related to the groups themselves. It is without a shadow of a doubt that in terms of skills and knowledge, there are no two identical groups, so we should allow for some divergence in results with respect to the different tests.

When it comes to the acquisition of speaking skills though, the real face-to-face classroom interaction is without an alternative. This can be attributed to many factors including psychological ones. Here, tradition plays a significant role, as students are more accustomed to real face-to-face interaction, which is more psychologically comforting. Technical issues were also important, as problems related to the provided quality of the online platforms obstructed interaction.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Although the research can be accepted as successful, it is only the first step in analyzing the different modes of learning ESP and EAP. It has its limitation both in terms of sample, time frame and in-depth analysis. Further studies are definitely required regarding greater number of students, longer time span and detailed research of the various components of written and oral features of this type of specialized learning of the English language. Having in mind that there are still many students who opt for both online learning, this mode should not be considered as confined only to the unexpected reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, blended learning seems to be the future and its development as a viable mode of ESP and EAP relies heavily on careful analysis of its benefits and drawbacks.

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