

Development of Pre-Service English Teachers' Language Skills and Learner Autonomy via Blended Learning

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Abstract: The use of information and communication technology greatly improved foreign languages teaching and learning. Learning management systems, such as Moodle, used to create and deliver courses, facilitate e-learning in different types of educational institutions. Blended learning as a combination of face-to face and e-learning is conducive to deep learning. We designed a new course “Teaching English as a foreign language to learners with special educational needs” to provide students enrolled in a master’s programme – pre-service English teachers, with an opportunity to enhance their language and professional skills as well as to develop their learner autonomy through meaningful learning experiences blending learning can supplement. We considered micro, meso and macro levels of the course implementation and functioning. In this paper we describe the context in which the course is introduced by providing information about the setting, the curriculum, the need for including this course in the master’s programme at the faculty of foreign languages. We also outline the way the course is designed, including its structure, particular tasks and assessment procedures and present students’ feedback about the impact of the course on their foreign language skills and learner autonomy. The results indicate that blended learning is an effective tool for development of pre-service teachers’ English language skills and learner autonomy. The findings of the study can be applied by faculty and administrators involved in the design of courses at tertiary level.

Keywords: *Learner autonomy; language skills; pre-service English teachers; blended learning; Moodle course.*

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1. Introduction

The aim of education in the modern world is to prepare students to lead successful, fulfilling lives by means of providing them with relevant educational experiences that nurture their interests, problem-solving abilities, and higher level thinking skills, including critical thinking and creativity. Educators hope that students “will transfer learning from one problem to another within a course, from one year in school to another, between school and home, and from school to the workplace” (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999: 39). In order to make learning experiences transferable, reliable and supportive teachers foster learner autonomy of their students and are autonomous learners themselves. Numerous research studies (Benson, 2001; Cotteral, 2000; Benson & Huang, 2008; Kyeong-Ouk, 2017; Zadorozhna, 2015 etc) demonstrate the need for developing learner autonomy of pre-service teachers for they will, in their turn, promote its development in the learners they will work with.

Learner autonomy is defined in research literature as “multidimensional concept” (Huang, 2006, p. 38), and its many definitions reflect the complexity of the phenomenon. We agree with Horváthová (2016) in that “autonomy represents reshaping of teacher and learner roles and shift of responsibility from teachers to learners due to a change in the distribution of power and authority” (p. 126). Autonomy is a multifaceted phenomenon which can take a variety of different forms depending on learning context, learning content, process of learning and learner characteristics (Horváthová, 2016).

To promote pre-service English teacher learner autonomy Zadorozhna (2014) argues the necessity to create a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted and encouraged by delegating more responsibilities to students in decision taking and self-evaluation. Such development should be done gradually by implementing in higher education institutions conditions for partial autonomy which are characterised by strict teacher’s management (teacher defines objectives, contents, methods, techniques and aids used; controls students’ work and evaluates the results); semi-autonomy with relatively strict teacher’s management (students define their learning objectives in collaboration with the teacher, select methods, techniques and aids to be used; teacher defines the contents, controls students work and evaluates the results); partially dependent autonomy with relatively flexible teacher’s management (students define their learning objectives in collaboration with the teacher, select methods, techniques and aids to be

used; teacher defines the contents; students are provided with opportunities to choose or select materials, evaluate the results; teacher evaluates the results); relatively full autonomy which presupposes defining individual learning objectives on the basis of the demands of the programme and individual needs (students may consult with teachers if necessary), ways how to achieve them, self-control, self-evaluation, self-correction.

As technology becomes an integral part of education, teacher training incorporating e-learning becomes necessary. E-learning is defined in "Open and Distance Learning – Key Terms & Definitions" (2015) as "an umbrella term that refers to the use of any digital device for teaching and learning, especially for delivery or accessing of content" (p. 2). Universities all over the world supplement face-to-face instruction with e-learning using different learning management systems (LMS).

LMS is "a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, and reporting of training programs, classroom and online events, e-learning programs, and training content" (Ellis, 2009, p. 1). A study by Coates, James & Baldwin (2005) examines the possible effects of LMS on teaching practices, on student engagement, on the nature of academic work and on the control over academic knowledge. The conclusion is made that LMS "are having, and will increasingly have, profound effects on university teaching and learning" (p. 19). At the same time the researchers express concern about possibility for LMS to stay simple enough to be a component of everyday teaching, while at the same time supporting sophisticated and diverse educational practices and stress the importance of "adopting and deploying LMS by higher education institutions in ways which are open, inclusive and educationally informed" (p. 33).

The use of LMS Moodle has been proven effective in English as a foreign language programmes (Jose, 2015) and in English language teachers' training (Paragina, Paragina, Jipa, Savu, Dumitrescu, 2011). Moodle (an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a software package designed to help educators in creating online courses. One can download and use this free, open source course management system on any computer. It has a large and diverse user community. In recent years researchers and practitioners in higher education field turn their attention to LMS to implement blended learning as means to achieve learning outcomes efficiently (Amaral & Shank, 2010; Dudeney & Hockly, 2016; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Hughes, 2007; Zadorozhna, 2014 etc).

Blended learning is a teaching and learning approach that demonstrates blend of different methods, technologies, and resources to

improve student learning. Some examples of blended learning are flipped classrooms, online interactions followed by face-to face teaching, online learning supplemented by face-to face practical activities, etc (Sharma and Barrett, 2007). The term “blended” learning refers to any programme of study that is delivered by “appropriately combining both synchronous interactive study (usually face-to-face) and asynchronous (individual) study (usually online)” (King, 2016, p. 2).

In this paper we argue that pre-service English teachers’ learner autonomy can be developed using blended learning where face-to-face interaction in the classroom (60%) is supplemented with a Moodle course (40%).

2. Incentive for change

Democratic reforms in Ukrainian society call for change in education at all levels. The country has adjusted to Western European trends, and as one of its most important steps it has decided to adopt the structural model and accept the Bologna Declaration (Nikolaeva, 2015). Key issues to be resolved by 2020 are enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives; making the systems more inclusive; implementing agreed structural reforms (Nikolaeva, 2015).

Ukrainian institutions experience lack of finances and decrease in student enrollment. To attract students, institutions must provide high quality education that is accessible in terms of time, money, etc. A goal of a higher education institution as it is defined worldwide is not only to give students knowledge for immediate use in the classroom but to teach them to transfer the acquired learning to similar situation to other subject areas and from school to the workplace. Instruction, according to Dorn and Soffos (2001), is designed to provide learners with opportunities to transfer existing skills, strategies, and other knowledge to new problem-solving activities across changing and varied contexts. One of the possible solutions for problems outlined above is offering different formats of teaching and learning (face-to-face, blended, online) to meet the needs of different groups including people with disabilities for whom visiting a university may be problematic. Online learning also presupposes less pressure on university facilities, which can be cost saving (Zadorozhna, 2014). Designing and teaching blended learning courses at universities has an added benefit of fostering learner autonomy, which is indispensable for educators.

3. The context

This section shows teaching context and explains the rationale for a course “Teaching English as a foreign language to learners with special educational needs” developed to raise pre-service English teachers’ awareness and understanding of special educational needs in their professional field. We will also describe the course structure and assessment procedures designed to improve our students’ English language and professional skills.

3.1. Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University

Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University (TNPU) is a recognized education and culture, science and methodology centre of pedagogical education in Ukraine. According to the results of Ukrainian higher education institutions consolidated rating (2018) the university ranks second among pedagogical universities. 38 academic departments of the university employ 469 lecturers. Students are offered a wide range of study programmes they can choose from. Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology and nine faculties engage 5 500 students in full-time and correspondence study. Distance Education Centre cooperates with academic departments with the aim to assist lecturers in creating and running Moodle courses.

The Faculty of Foreign Languages employs 88 lecturers in five departments. The student body of the faculty consists of more than 600 students enrolled in bachelor’s and master’s programmes. The course “Teaching English as a foreign language to learners with special educational needs” is an elective course for students enrolled in a master’s programme “Secondary Education. (Language and Literature (English))”.

3.2. “Teaching English as a foreign language to learners with special educational needs” as an academic discipline

Ukrainian education is becoming increasingly inclusive due to continuous government and general public support. However, teaching in inclusive classrooms is a skill, which has to be mastered. Nowadays, all professional development programmes of in-service foreign languages teachers contain a module on inclusion. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has developed an online course on inclusive education for primary school teachers. However, teacher training university curricula were slow to meet the challenge. Foreign language teaching methodology courses offered at bachelor’s and master’s levels do not include content on

teaching a foreign language to learners with special educational needs. Therefore, the need to develop and include courses with such content at all levels of higher education is pressing.

The course is offered in the third semester of the programme. It is a three-credit course (90 hours), which includes lectures (26 hours), seminars (16 hours), independent study (48 hours). Face-to face interaction in class is supplemented with e-learning using Moodle course developed by the authors of this paper in collaboration with Distance Education Centre of TNPU. Thus, synchronous (face-to-face) study is blended with asynchronous (online) study in order to create the learning environment which is conducive to learning.

The learning outcomes and performance indicators of the course reflect its connection with developing learner autonomy. As a result of learning on this course, students should demonstrate the following abilities: to evaluate, select and adapt materials and Internet resources to teach language to learners with special educational needs; to choose teaching strategies, methods and assessment tools to teach English to learners with special educational needs; to design activities to develop tolerance, understanding and awareness in learners; to reflect on their learning on the course.

They will do this by locating, evaluating and adapting materials and Internet resources to teach language to learners with special educational needs; selecting teaching strategies, methods and assessment tools in inclusive classrooms; cooperating in designing activities to develop tolerance, understanding and awareness in Ukrainian society; demonstrating reflective skills. In the learning outcomes there is no specific reference to improving students English language skills. Rather, their professional skills are highlighted. However, as students work with the course content in Moodle individually and participate in pair, group and whole class activities during lectures and seminars, their English language proficiency is increasing.

Designing learning objectives for this course we also aimed at increasing students' motivation. According to King, "...not only must the course aims and learning objectives be made transparent and meaningful to students, but also that students themselves must take more responsibility for their learning. Being more in control of one's learning is a great motivational driver" (King, 2016: 12). Therefore, during the first class, while the students familiarise themselves with the course syllabus, they are encouraged to describe their expectations and discuss the learning outcomes choosing those which are relevant and meaningful for them.

When devising a blended course, an important question that we must ask ourselves as teachers is how much time should be spent in the classroom and online. Class contact time is dictated by the institution, but online contact time can be as much or as little as necessary and is to a large extent decided by learners themselves (King, 2016). Our students' language proficiency is expected to be at levels C1-C2 according to CEFR scale. This is in line with research findings that the higher is the level of language proficiency the more suitable is the course for developing learner autonomy (Allford & Pachler, 2007; Benson, 2001).

The role of a teacher is that of a facilitator, activity manager and assessor. Such approach aims at developing independent learners who will be able to transfer and use new knowledge and skills in professional settings and acquire new skills as necessary.

Choosing the right blend is a key part of the teacher's role (King, 2016). In our course the distribution of face-to face and e-learning via Moodle is 60:40. We aimed at designing the course that best fits learners' needs and wishes whilst taking into account assessment requirements explained later in this paper and institutional constraints (financial constraints, completion for outstanding students, rapidly evolving technologies, economic and workforce needs of the region). Studies by Amaral & Shank (2010) and Hughes (2007) have shown that well-designed blended courses enhance student learning and increase student retention.

Having outlined the need for including this course in the master's programme, in the following section we will discuss the course design and describe its structure.

3.3. Course design and structure

Cotterall (2000) proposes five course design principles for language courses which seek to foster learner autonomy: the course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies; course tasks are explicitly linked to the language learning process; course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks; the course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance; the course promotes reflection on learning. Using these principles as guidelines, we paid special attention to the course functioning at different levels in a programme, its syllabus, developing relevant and interesting for students activities and tasks keeping in mind that it was not a language course.

Neumeier (2005) argues that an ever-increasing hybridity requires that course design receives greater attention. The researcher states that it is

important that sufficient thought is given to course design when trying to implement elements of blended learning into a foreign language programme. A course designer has to consider the place of this course in a study programme. Jones in Gruba & Hinkelman (2012) stresses the importance of regarding the programme as “a three-part structure that operates on a micro, meso and macro level” (p. 30).

The micro level of course design refers to the decisions made related to task design in the classroom. Task design in the blended learning context will promote the use of technologies in order to develop and enrich the learning experience of the learner and promote autonomous learning. The use of technology resources to complete the course tasks will be discussed further in this paper. At the micro level the designer must contemplate the specific ability of the students in each particular classroom with consideration given to lesson plans and suitable class activities within the realms of learner’s capabilities. As the course is delivered in English, it engages its use with the aim of raising the students’ awareness of effective strategies to be used while teaching English to learners with special educational needs.

The main objective at the meso level of course design is to consider institutional goals. Every educational institution inevitably has a list of goals that each class group is expected to reach within the confinements of term time. What must be kept in consideration is the overall institutional policies and graduate attributes, faculty or departmental guidelines that an institution may expect from each course structure. Meso level course structure contemplates local or institutional guidelines that may alter the boundaries or learner goals. Learning outcomes and degree requirements might heavily influence course design at this level. The course we designed follows TNPU policies on e-course design and promoting inclusive educational environment.

The main purpose at the macro level of course design is to observe the effects that a blended learning approach can have on the community or society in general. At this level, course designers must consider the effects that can be shown at the international, national or state level after the successful launching of a blended learning course. Thus, the purpose of the course is to build a community of educators who will promote changes in Ukrainian society by supporting learners with special educational needs, changing the way Ukrainian society perceives people with disabilities.

The course is divided into three modules: 1. Inclusion in Ukrainian and world education; 2. Creating an inclusive foreign language learning experience for learners with special educational needs; 3. Developing

awareness, understanding and tolerance. Each module includes tasks and activities, which reflect the course objectives and are aimed at achieving learning outcomes.

The face-to-face social environment of the classroom becomes more meaningful due to its communicative and student-centred approach. Lectures are conducted in the form of mini lectures, “buzz” groups, pyramid discussions. At the end of each lecture students are engaged in guided reflection by choosing a reflective task to write. Reflective writing helps them to develop learner autonomy through meaningful intrapersonal communication. The tasks are based on lectures content and develop the students' critical thinking skills, which helps them to become self-directed learners. Using reflection on topics discussed during the lectures and on their previous experience students internalise learning content, making it more personal and meaningful.

Course seminars are conducted weekly on topics prescribed by the syllabus. Students are assigned reading tasks to prepare them for discussion in class. They are also encouraged to discuss experiences outside the classroom: during their study at secondary schools or at universities, during observation and teaching practice at schools. It is not uncommon to hear them discuss their friends or relatives' experiences regarding inclusion or problems learners with special educational needs are facing.

Getting students to do preparatory work at home is essential because it saves time in the classroom. It helps learners be better prepared to engage in classroom activities. It also helps them reflect constantly on their work, assessing themselves. Furthermore, the online component of the course allows students to learn in more self-paced, self-regulated ways, thus empowering them and making them more independent learners.

3.4. Course tasks

In this section we will briefly describe various course tasks and their role in developing learner autonomy. The tasks reflect the course catering for different learning styles and fostering learner autonomy while promoting meaningful use of the English language.

3.4.1 Reflective writing journals

As we mentioned earlier, each lecture ends by a written task requiring students to reflect on their own experiences in relation to the lecture topics. It helps them develop the habit of reflection. At the same time, reflective writing involves analyzing, interpreting and evaluating the

course experience as a way to improve similar future experiences while teaching.

3.4.2 Multimedia presentations

For the last seminar students prepare an oral presentation supported by media. They choose their own topic for presentation, which enhances their engagement, develops intrinsic motivation and makes them feel empowered.

The presentations are done individually or in teams. All team members are expected to participate equally in both the preparation and the performance of the presentation. The presentation summarises the course content for students choose different topics from the list, prepared by the lecturer, and discuss these topics beforehand to prevent repetition. Presenters provide background information on their topic, explain the importance and relevance of their choice of topic, and clearly define and explain their research focus, questions, and aims. They should also report their findings and make recommendations for further research. The students are advised to rehearse so that each speaker coordinates well with the others and with the media being used. They should use appropriate verbal and non-verbal skills to communicate with the audience. Presenters are also required to engage with the audience at different stages of the presentation. Accurate language is needed throughout to present the researched message concisely and clearly. This task is also effective for developing professional skills. Students often comment on how it prepares them for public defence of their theses.

3.4.3 Infographics and posters

Learning about special education experience abroad students create infographics for countries of their choice using *Canva*, *Vennage*, *Easel.ly*, *Snappa* or similar tools. Creating infographics helps the students organise information they find online and represent it visually. For some of them creating infographics is a new experience they like and keep using in preparation for other classes and during their teaching.

Another task is creating an awareness poster for English language teachers who work with learners with special educational needs. The poster can be an individual, pair or small group assignment which is a part of a course portfolio.

3.5. Assessment

Assessment in this course consists of the following assignments: cumulative check of understanding in the form of an open-book quiz (40% of total for the course) and a course portfolio containing three items (60% of total for the course). The items to be included in the portfolio are: reflective journal (40%), an infographic (10%), presentation materials (10%). The purpose of portfolio is involving students in the process of building their competences, in reflection on changes, in “creating” themselves (Nikolaeva, 2013, p. 49).

The quiz is a part of Moodle course. In preparation for the quiz students can practice using its trial version as many times as needed. The settings for the actual quiz allow one attempt.

An assessment portfolio can be submitted in either paper or electronic format via Moodle tasks. Allowing the students to make their own decision as to the format of the portfolio is one more step to practicing learner autonomy. Student feedback is positive about this form of delivery and most make the comments that having the online element allowed them to catch up (if they had been ill or away for different reasons) with the rest of class, to better prepare for the face-to-face classroom interaction and to revise more efficiently.

4. Method

In 2017-2018 academic year, a study which measured the development of the English language skills and learner autonomy of pre-service foreign languages teachers via blended learning was conducted. The aim of the study was to find out whether there was dynamics in the development of English language skills and learner autonomy caused by content and activities of pre-service foreign languages teachers' in the blended learning course “Teaching English as a foreign language to learners with special educational needs”.

4.1. Participants

27 Foreign Languages Department students of TNPU enrolled in a master's programme who took an elective course “Teaching English as a foreign language to learners with special educational needs” participated in the study. Among them, there were 25 females and 2 males aged between 21 and 25 years old.

4.2 Instruments

2 anonymous online questionnaires served as instruments in this study. Questionnaire 1 included general background information about students, a section on the English language level, students' expectations regarding English language skills improvement within the context of the course and the Autonomous Learning Scale (Makaskill & Taylor, 2010) Questionnaire 2, beside aforementioned components, included sections on course satisfaction and perceived English language skills improvement at the completion of the course.

In both questionnaires we included the Autonomous Learning Scale to measure the participants' learner autonomy at the beginning and after completion of the course. The Autonomous Learning Scale (Makaskill & Taylor, 2010) is a 12-item psychometrically sound measure with two subscales measuring Independence of Learning, *I tend to be motivated to work by assessment deadlines*, [item 10] and Study habits, *I frequently find excuses for not getting down to work*, [item 2] with proven internal reliability and concurrent validity. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*very unlike me*) to 5 (*very like me*) with higher scores indicating greater levels of autonomy, more independence and more positive attitudes to learning. Two items in the scale are negatively worded to help prevent response bias in participants. The students did Questionnaire 1 during the first week of the course and Questionnaire 2 after completion of the course. The questionnaires were administered via Moodle course.

5. Results and discussion

The results showing expected and perceived English language skills improvement are presented in Fig. 1 below.

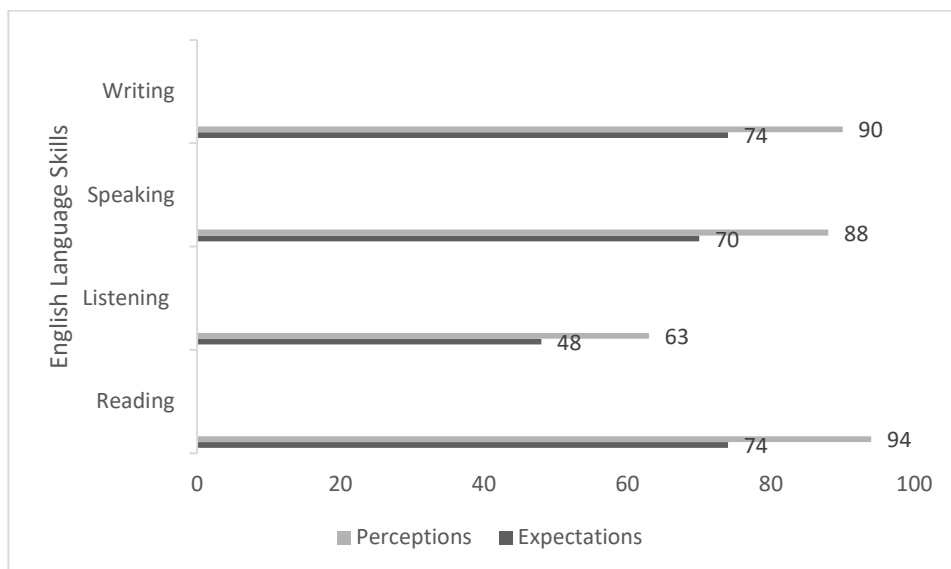


Fig. 1. English language skills improvement: expectations vs perceptions

According to Fig. 1, at the beginning of the course the majority of the surveyed students expected to improve their English skills, especially reading (74%) and writing skills (74%). Upon completion of the course 94% of the students agreed that their reading and 90% of the students agreed that their writing skills have improved. 88% of the students agreed that their speaking skills have developed. The number of students who agreed that their listening skills improved was the lowest (63%) although students reported an increase in this skill as well.

Besides comparing the students' expectations and perceptions of language skills improvement, the research aimed to look at learner autonomy development. We wanted students to reflect on their autonomous learning at the beginning and upon completion of the course and used the Autonomous Learning Scale by Makaskill & Taylor for this purpose. The results are shown in Fig. 2.

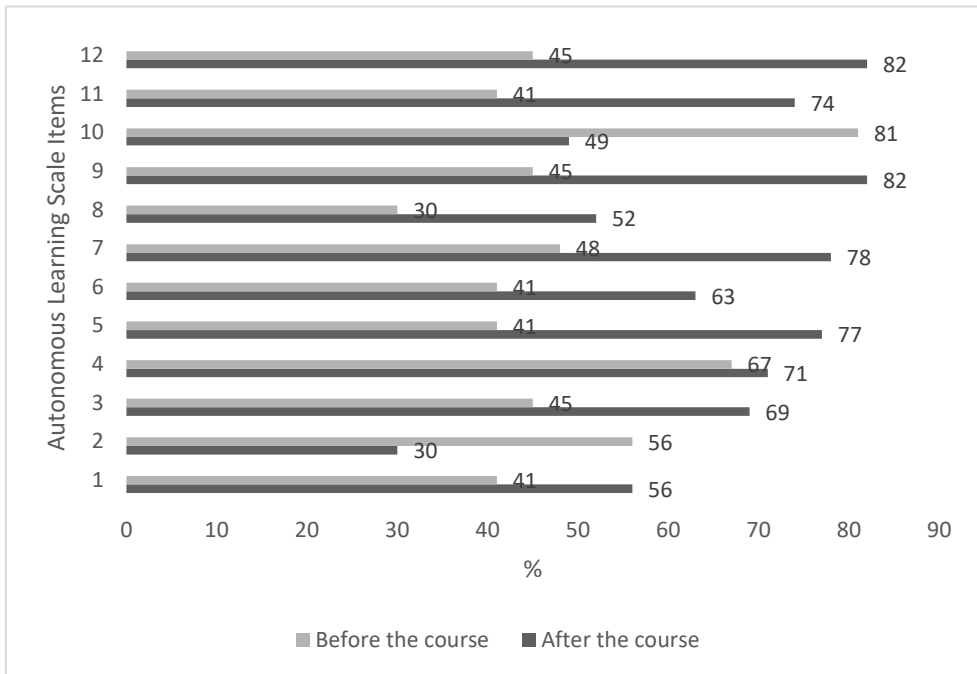


Fig. 2. The Autonomous Learning Scale results at the beginning and at the end of the course

The results indicate an increase in levels of autonomous learning. The highest percentage increase was reported for items 5 (*I am happy working on my own* – 36%), 9 (*I plan my time for study effectively* – 37%) and 12 (*I enjoy new learning experiences* – 37%). These findings support the authors' choice of the course tasks (reflective journals, creating infographics) and course delivery mode (blended learning). The lowest percentage increase was reported for item 4 (*My time management is good* – 4%), which can be explained by the fact that time management skills have been consistently developed while the students studied at bachelor's level.

Delivering the course “Teaching English as a foreign language to learners with special educational needs” to pre-service English teachers we

employed classroom strategies that facilitate transfer of learning to the workplace, described by Gardner & Korth (1997). At the beginning of the course, prior to training itself we developed systematic instructional design, analysed the students' readiness and designed a peer coaching component (implemented in preparation for multimedia presentations and creating infographics and posters). As the course progressed, we used various course tasks that are consistent with the principles of adult learning, allotted time for discussions in lectures and seminars as well as time for reflection when the students worked on their entries in reflective journals, provided the students with many different examples of classroom situations involving teaching learners with special educational needs, combined on-line and off-line learning experiences as a means to develop learner autonomy and to facilitate transfer. At the end of the course the lecturer enhanced application work by collecting feedback from students on the course satisfaction. 97% of students were satisfied with the course overall, 89% expressed satisfaction with course materials, 86% were satisfied with assessment criteria. Some comments include:

- *The strongest aspect of this course is its relevance to present situation in Ukrainian education.*
- *I was able to learn important skills I will need in the classroom.*
- *I liked the format of this course and the choice I had while learning.*

Overall, both formal and informal student feedback on the course has been positive.

The results of this study are consistent with the research by Kish (2015), Paragina, Paragina, Jipa, Savu, Dumitrescu (2011), Ergul Sonmer & Koc (2018) supporting the use of LMS in pre-service teacher education. Our research proves the importance of blended learning in higher education and is in line with Garrison and Kanuka (2004) and Sharma & Barrett (2007) conclusions about the effectiveness of this teaching and learning approach. Blended learning develops English language skills of pre-service teachers and their learner autonomy.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that blended learning delivery of educational content to pre-service English teachers develops their learner autonomy. We also argued that blended learning is suitable for developing language and professional skills of pre-service teachers. We described the structure of the course and tasks used in face-to-face learning and e-learning. Both the structure and the tasks allow for transfer of the learning

experiences into other situations, subject areas (courses in the English language and in the English language teaching methodology, graduate and post-graduate study in Ukraine or abroad), and into the workplace (as school administrators or teachers creating inclusive learning environment in their respective schools). The results indicate that students are generally satisfied with the contribution of the course to the development of their language and professional skills. Blended learning course delivery resulted in better student learning experience, improvement in learning outcomes, greater motivation, confidence and satisfaction, leading to learners becoming more autonomous. Further research will focus on using blended learning to improve academic support of students.

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