

## Developing Blended English Language Training in Military Education Institutions

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### Abstract

*The paper focuses on the main aspects of using blended learning for the English language training (ELT) in the Ukrainian professional military education (PME) institutions. It examines the major challenges and key problems while implementing blended ELT, introduces the recommendations for further developing the hybrid teaching methodology (C. Rao, 2019) in the PME institutions.*

**Keywords:** Blended Learning, ELT, Hybrid Teaching Methodology, Ukrainian PME Institutions

### Introduction

Perfecting the ELT is considered as an important factor in reforming and developing the Armed Forces of Ukraine, implementing the Euro-Atlantic standards, and achieving interoperability with NATO forces. The critical task for the Ukrainian PME institutions to prepare their graduates to the STANAG level 2 in English proficiency requires considerable increasing the ELT effectiveness. One of the main approaches to achieve this objective is to transform the ELT from residential instruction to blended learning that has proved its advantages comparatively to purely face-to-face or online classes (C. Rao, 2019; DEEP Report, 2020). The current pandemic caused by Covid-19 has become an additional catalyst for developing the hybrid teaching methodology in the PME institutions.

### Blended Learning for the ELT as A Pedagogical Approach

The term “blended learning” was originated more than 17 years ago and still does not have the ultimate definition (C. Whittaker, 2013). In this paper we consider blended learning for the ELT as a pedagogical approach that aimed to improve the English language teaching efficiency through flexible, thoughtful fusion of resident instruction with online and “mobile” activities of cadets (C. Dziuban et al., 2004; E. Banados, 2006; P. John, 2011; C. Whittaker, 2013; C. Rao, 2019). This approach allows extending the ELT “beyond the classroom walls and facilitates better access to learning resources” (cited C. Rao, 2019).

The faculties of the national PME institutions apply the above mentioned hybrid teaching methodology combining traditional face-to-face classroom methods with use of the Distance English Learning System (DELS) in different blended learning forms (C. Rao, 2019; DEEP Report, 2020). The DELS includes specialized distance English learning courses developed on the Learning Platforms applying computer-based technologies and tools, using mainly the English authentic material (e.g. Web’s grammar exercises,

texts, video, audio, etc.) as well as the digital resources of the Ukrainian PME Electronic Library (DEEP Report, 2020).

The adapting of the blended ELT in the Ukrainian PME institutions has revealed significant beneficial effects on

- Learners' motivation "providing interactive virtual learning environments, adding multimodality, fostering communication and collaboration, increasing self-management and self-assessment, encouraging out-of-class learning" (cited P. Mehran et al., 2017)
- Intensity and individualization of the cadets' ELT applying self-paced learning and using asynchronous English material (DEEP Report, 2020)
- Improving the teacher's control on the English skills development of each cadet
- Enhancing the advantages and capabilities of various "active" teaching methods including Communicative, Learner-Centred and Task-Based learning approaches (C. Rao, 2020).

On the other hand, the blended learning has exposed diverse social, professional, and technological challenges (C. Dziuban et al., 2004; E. Banados, 2006; P. Mehran et al., 2017; C.Rao, 2019; DEEP Report, 2020) in particular:

- Challenges to cohesion, networking and social capital of learners that require a different type of their discipline, teamwork, and attitude to the ELT
- Need to improve the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) literacy of teaching staff and cadets, especially their online skills
- Preparation of the DELS courses requires more time and effort from teachers than resident courses
- Complicated assessment of cadets' communication skills (speaking and listening)
- The ELT effectiveness heavily depends on the online and technical resources, their capabilities
- Need to maximize the Learning Platforms, improve Wi-Fi access and bandwidth, Internet network reliability etc.

The above-mentioned issues in adapting to blended learning environment are addressed in three main areas: adjusting the ELT management; perfecting the faculty's online proficiency; developing the DELS.

Adjusting the ELT management for blended learning purposes primarily includes

- Adapting the ELT curriculum and schedules with focus on teaching staff work time management and optimal use of the DELS capabilities of (DEEP Report, 2020)
- Creating the joint DELS design teams that comprise the ELT teachers and ICT support personnel (DEEP Report, 2020)
- Providing the adequate Learning Platforms, associated technologies and equipment (e.g., interactive digital boards)

- Managing the training courses to improve the ITC literacy of the teaching staff and learners
- Conducting appropriate faculty's training and practice prior to preparing and teaching the DELS courses
- Organizing proper control of the blended English classes, providing regular after-action reviews
- Promoting exchange of the lessons learned, good and best practices in applying the blended learning with the ELT teaching staff, ICT personnel, and other faculties
- Facilitating academic cooperation with the NATO and other partner PME institutions on developing the blended ELT, namely in the frame of the Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP).

Perfecting the faculty's online proficiency is aimed to improve their ITC literacy, skills to develop and instruct the blended ELT classes. Today the online proficiency is no longer a need; it is one of the modern requirements to the English teacher. Besides, in the conditions of wide access to overload information including numerous English learning courses, each blended English lesson must meet the highest quality standards. While preparing and teaching the DELS courses instructors should pay attention to

- Close teamwork with ICT specialists (DEEP Report, 2020)
- Constant improving of online skills, mastering proficiency in use of the Learning Platforms, associated technologies and equipment
- Mutual faculty's sharing of the lessons learned and best practices in applying the blended ELT
- Implementing various traditional and innovative teaching approaches, methods and techniques based primarily on the current learners' proficiency in English (C.Rao, 2020)
- Considering the learners' online readiness before and during the blended lessons (P.Mehran et al., 2017)
- Providing systematic control on learners' English skills development, especially on their competence in speaking and listening
- Developing appropriate synchronous and asynchronous material on the Learning Platform for each blended English lesson with focus on active and creative cadets' groupwork as well as on individual-paced learning
- Not all English material used for resident teaching is suitable for the online learning, but many English resident lessons can be quickly transformed to blended learning by varying the delivery but not the content (DEEP Report, 2020). For instance, online openly available short presentations and video didactic exercises have proved their efficiency in improving learner's proficiency in English.

At the beginning, the Ukrainian PME institutions have developed the DELS mainly on the MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) platform. The MOODLE is an open Web source that has low cost, flexibility and easy access to use (BeamStacks, 2017). It is adapted for resident and distant learning and allows uploading and using different types of content formats (Beam Stacks, 2017). On the other hand, MOODLE cannot cope with big projects (e.g., increasing number of users

makes slower the learning system) and requires qualified staff support to overcome frequent troubles for learners (Open Textbooks for Hong Kong, 2016); Beam Stacks, 2017).

Starting from 2017 the Ukrainian PME institutions have begun to advance the DELS using capabilities and resources of the NATO/DEEP-owned Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL) Portal in the frame of the DEEP. The purpose of the ADL is to serve as a repository of online courses and facilitate designing the distance learning courses (P. Gawliczek, 2019). The Portal allows exchanging the partners' expertise, knowledge and ideas on the ADL as well as implementing new technologies in the PME institutions in particularly to improve cadets' ELT (P. Gawliczek, 2019).

The principal issues of further developing the DELS that need to be solved are

- Creating a Joint DELS centre for direct support of the English teachers and learners in developing and applying the DELS courses as well as for exchange of the lessons learned and best practices in using the blended ELT
- Adapting the DEEP legal implementation policies within the Ukrainian PME institutions for common understanding and efficient application of the ADL services and software (DEEP Report, 2020)
- Perfecting the ELT management principles and providing proper financial support to ensure the faculty's online proficiency and evolving and re-engineering the DELS designs "using innovative technology-enhanced approaches with heavy emphasis on the technical transformation" (DEEP Report, 2020)
- Organizing regular formal observing of the blended English lessons and conducting their after action reviews as well as surveys with the ELT teachers and students
- Facilitating exchanging the lessons learned and best practices among partner PME institutions in order to identify common problems in advancing the blended ELT, analyze their root causes and propose ways of solving
- Putting priority on the quality of the blended English lessons through applying multiple teaching methods with emphasis on interactive methods; using the mix of synchronous and asynchronous authentic English learning material; providing easy-to-follow material and avoiding "cognitive overkill" (P.Mehran et al., 2017; DEEP Report, 2020)
- Using the DELS and blended lessons for the language testing purposes and systematic teacher's control on the English skills development of each cadet, especially in speaking and listening
- Employing the advanced learning platforms with use of efficient innovative technologies and in this context considering the ITC as only a powerful tool in achieving the ELT objectives (P. Gawliczek, 2019; DEEP Report, 2020).

## Conclusion

Emerging and persistent social and technological challenges as well as opportunities in today's fast changing world requires adequate adapting of the military education systems, in particular, perfecting the

known pedagogical approaches. The blended learning for the English language training in the professional military education institutions does not replace other teaching methods but expands their advantages and capabilities. This hybrid pedagogical methodology that is based on flexible, thoughtful fusion of resident and distance teaching enhances cadets' motivation to learn English and gives them broader access to learning environment resources.

Further adapting of the blended English language teaching is aimed to improve cadets' proficiency in English through adjusting the language training management, perfecting the faculty and learners' online skills, and improving the Distance English Learning System with use of advanced learning platforms.

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