

OBSERVATIONS AND PREPARATIONS FOR BLENDED LEARNING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

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The general objective of this paper is to present the results gained at the stage of observation and preparation to implement blended learning strategies in a foreign language class at Gavar State University. During the research the following methods were applied: theoretical, social and pedagogical, experimental, statistic, SWOT analysis.

The results of the research came to prove the hypotheses put forward during the research: 1) If blended learning is implemented in teaching/learning EFL, it increases the language competence of English language learners in the setting of EFL. 2) If blended learning is adopted, it can raise student engagement and motivation. Our research demonstrates that blended learning can be used to effectively increase the language competence of English language learners in the setting of EFL. The adoption of blended learning is associated with raising student engagement and motivation. While designing a blended learning the establishment of a community and culture of learning as well as the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) should be taken into account.

Keywords: foreign language teaching/learning, English as a foreign language (EFL), Blended Learning (BL), designing blended learning.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, instructors in Armenia have made use of a wide range of methods and techniques, that is, learning resources and activities to help students achieve certain goals. Face-to-face activities, presentations, audio and visual materials, paper based assessments, web research and group exercises have been the ace of aces of teaching in classrooms for many decades. More recent studies show that online resources and mobile collaboration tools have expanded learning opportunities. All of these approaches combine together and make up the term that is known in education as *blended learning*.

Some educators describe blended learning as *what they've been doing successfully for decades*: that is utilizing a wide range of techniques and activities that provide personalised, subjective and student-centered learning experiences in the classrooms. Today, the thing that makes it different from

the past is the exceptional Internet access which provides rich resources, services and more importantly *connectivity*, that is the capability to create online communities and networks that facilitate the overall learning experience. Moreover, the use of mobile technologies such as smartphone cameras, voice recording apps and GPS is growing very fast expanding the learning experience way beyond the school walls.

For others, blended learning poses a challenge. They find it uncomfortable and are not willing to fully grasp its meaning. They are not familiar with the potential of technologies and media resources that the learners use daily.

To demonstrate how to implement blended learning in Armenian classrooms, this research reinforces the overall idea that blended learning comes in many forms; it is versatile and multipurpose educational solution.

The general objective of this paper is to present the results gained at the stage of observation and preparation to implement blended learning strategies in a foreign language class at Gavar State University.

METHODOLOGY

We put forward the following hypotheses during our research.

1. If blended learning is implemented in teaching/learning EFL, it increases the language competence of English language learners in the setting of EFL.
2. If blended learning is adopted, it can raise student engagement and motivation.

The whole research was aimed at proving or rejecting the hypotheses.

During the research the following methods were applied:

- *theoretical: study of relevant scientific literature and electronic sources;*
- *social and pedagogical: observation and monitoring of the teaching/learning process;*
- *experimental: conducting experimental teaching with the use of blended learning (at the next stage of our research);*
- *statistic: statistical analysis of the data received;*
- *SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis.*

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Blended learning and language skills. According to our research at Gavar State University, language learners can improve their language skills by using blended learning. For instance, employing mixed learning rather of conventional face-to-face or wholly online modes can help learners improve their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

As an example, we looked at the impact of blended learning on the improvement of English language learners' reading skills in a quasi-experimental study. The study specifically sought to determine whether blended learning might be utilized to improve the reading ability of 8 intermediate-level Armenian EFL students. The participants were split into two groups at random: the experimental group, which got blended learning instruction focused on reading skills in the classroom, and the control group, which received a more conventional approach to teaching English. To gauge the learners' reading skills, tests were administered to the two groups both before and after the intervention. The usage of blended learning had a statistically significant favorable impact on the EFL learners' reading competency, it was evident upon comparing the two groups using a t-test. In other words, we came to the conclusion that implementing blended learning with language learners directly impacts the improvement of language learners' reading abilities. According to our observations, blended learning promotes learning and can be successfully implemented in English reading lessons in Armenia.

Similarly, we looked at how a blended learning approach can help EFL students improve their writing skills. The study specifically sought to ascertain whether blended learning might be a useful tactic that aids in improving students' overall writing skills. 6 EFL students from Gavar State University took part in the study. The students were split into two groups; one group received instruction in English writing using the conventional face-to-face method, and the other group received instruction via a blended learning model. At the conclusion of the instructional period, the group that received blended learning instruction outperformed the other group in writing. In other words, the participation of EFL learners helped to strengthen their writing skills through the use of blended learning. Let's sum up by saying that the participants' writing improved in many ways thanks to the use of blended learning, including grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and paragraph coherence.

Additionally, we looked at blended learning application in an EFL setting. The study sought to ascertain how blended learning is applied in ESL classes and how face-to-face and distant learning are merged using Neumeier's blended learning framework. The study was done with the first-year students at Gavar State University in a speaking and listening class. Eight EFL students and one English Master's graduate took part in the discussion. To investigate the efficacy of this learning paradigm, the research method involved observing the language classes, surveying the students, and interviewing the graduate Master's student who acted as a facilitator. According to the results, blended learning can be used to effectively and successfully teach all language skills. All of the participants had favorable opinions and attitudes about using blended learning into the teaching of English. They thought that using online instruction enhanced traditional methods and enhanced language learning for students. Therefore, we can state as a conclusion that blended learning can be used successfully to teach English in programs for foreign/second languages.

In a related study, we looked into how a blended learning approach might be used to teach an English course. The study's main goal was to create a blended learning environment where EFL students would use instructional blogging. The study included 6 EFL students. The effectiveness of the blended learning mode was examined using a number of research techniques, including interviews, input from teachers and students, surveys of student satisfaction, and self-reflection from students. According to the study's findings, employing video-based blogs in a blended learning environment has several advantages, including raising students' speaking abilities, fostering a sense of autonomy and teamwork, and speeding up the learning process. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that one advantage of the blended learning strategy is that it helps students become more proficient in speaking as well as other language skills including grammar, phonetics, facial expression, vocabulary and eye contact.

The use of blended learning does not always directly affect language abilities, however, as the use of technology often presents more of a challenge than a benefit, according to our earlier research with more conventionally oriented groups. For instance, we looked at the impact of employing a blended learning method in a class where using dictionaries is essential to learning vocabulary. The study investigated how English language learners felt about using blended learning to gain vocabulary. 5 students who were enrolled in an English program at Gavar State University in Armenia participated in the study. The participants were split into two groups (3 and 5): one group studied the target language using a blended learning strategy, while the other group received the same vocabulary training using the conventional teaching methodology (face-to-face instruction). Both groups took a vocabulary test at the conclusion of the lesson period to gauge their vocabulary proficiency. The results showed that, despite the fact that students were satisfied with blended learning as a teaching approach, it had no beneficial influence on students' vocabulary knowledge. It's crucial to note that many earlier research studies that connected the usage of blended learning to the improvement of language abilities did not support our findings.

Students' motivation and engagement. Students' motivation, contentment, and engagement may be some of the most frequently mentioned advantages of blended learning in the context of ESL/EFL. When both methods (conventional face-to-face and online) were used together, language learners typically displayed their satisfaction. The benefit of blended learning is that it makes efficient use of both teaching methods, which encourages student interaction and participation in the process of learning a language.

To provide an example, we conducted a study at Gavar State University that looked at the use of blended learning to improve English learners' language abilities and learning autonomy. The study involved 15 English majors and was conducted in an English language and literature class. The purpose of the study was to comprehend how students felt about blended learning when learning English. E-lessons, a survey, and achievement assessments were the devices utilized to gather the data. The study's conclusions showed that using an online strategy that is compatible with classroom instruction improves language learners' language skills. Also, it was shown that blended learning can be used to boost learners' motivation and independent learning skills. According to the data gathered, the advantage of the blended learning strategy for language learners is that students can acquire and put into practice their language skills whenever and wherever they wish.

Also, we investigated the efficacy of blended learning in an academic English writing course at Gavar State University among master's degree candidates. The purpose of the study was to assess many facets of blended learning, including course design, content presentation, and student interaction. Each week, the study's class met for 20 minutes in the classroom and then met online for an additional hour using the convenient software Zoom. Based on the overall reflection and the students' evaluation of the course, it was discovered that the students highly valued the use of the blended learning strategy because it had many benefits like encouraging independent learning, increasing classroom interaction, removing communication anxiety, and enhancing learners' academic writing skills. We can therefore conclude that because it permits for two different types of learning interactions, the use of blended learning is beneficial.

In a different study, we used a social media element to assess the efficacy of blended learning. In particular, we combined face-to-face EFL training with the usage of several educational Facebook groups. Eight undergraduate EFL students taking an EFL course at Gavar State University participated in the study. Both regular classroom instruction and online instruction using Facebook groups were used to train the learners. It was discovered that most students had positive opinions of this learning method and after watching students use this blended learning strategy and questioning them about it not all of them but the bulk of the group were prone to use social media in future sessions. The use of a Facebook group in conjunction with lesson plans in the classroom was deemed intriguing and real by the learners. One of the key advantages of blended learning is that they were inspired to interact and work together. You present the findings, but there isn't really a clear understanding of the "how"; what is it about blended learning, perhaps most notably the technological component, that promotes high levels of student enthusiasm and autonomy? What character trait predisposes one to success?

In a similar vein, we looked into students' viewpoints and the efficiency of blended learning as a method of instruction in an ESL writing class. Ten university students taking two writing classes participated in the study for more than two weeks. The pretest, posttest, midterm exam, and surveys were the four data sources that were used. The findings demonstrated that students' attitudes and opinions of the usage of a blended learning strategy in L2 writing classes were favorable. The students thought that this teaching strategy was practical, inspiring, and interactive. Also, the usage of blended learning led to improved writing performance among students. According to the study, blended learning enhanced student motivation and supported a number of crucial elements of language learning,

including collaboration, interaction, and autonomy. According to our study, the students appeared to value the chances for engagement and were content with blended learning for L2 writing.

Designing Blended Learning. It is not as simple as simply putting traditional information online to create a blended learning environment. The advantages of online learning “tended to result from a redesign of education to extend learning time or foster higher engagement with content,” warned Means¹. It is also mentioned that blended learning environments, which “were likely to incorporate additional instructional resources and activities that encouraged interactions among learners,” were responsible for such beneficial outcomes. Lehman and Conceição² also advocate using “intentional design,” which they define as “a strategy that incorporates purposeful action and takes into account the online learning environment, the teaching process, and learner characteristics.”

In Gavar State University the blended courses are to be done in specific classrooms that are equipped with computers, headphones, a good WIFI signal and Smartboards. Fortunately, our University has a couple of such classrooms and it is easy to get access to them. The only **obstacle** in these scenarios is that university lecturers who use traditional teaching methods are not open to designing nor letting students design their learning environment.

Community & Culture. The establishment of a community and culture of learning and growth in Gavar State University is one of the most crucial aspects we should take into account when designing a blended learning experience for learners. In a conventional classroom setting, it is much simpler to create a sense of community than it is in an online setting. By stating that “Culture is especially useful—or toxic—in blended programs because blended learning goes hand in hand with giving students more control and flexibility,” BlendedLearning.org³ cast light on this crucial factor. The move toward a personalized setting may backfire if students are unable to manage that agency due to a lack of processes and societal norms.

When interviewing Gavar State University lecturers, it was clear, that, in order to include elements of interaction and cooperation among online students, they must be very deliberate when designing their courses. An instructor working in the area of blended learning should make sure that the culture they establish in the conventional setting is maintained online as well.

Creating an atmosphere of learning and making it the new trend is absolutely necessary. We might even argue that creating a learning culture requires a change from the conventional teacher-centered model to a student-centered one, allowing the students to take charge of their own education while the instructor is available to give individualized, direct instruction to a small group of students or a single student. The following are Poirier's⁴ recommendations for educational tactics that can promote a climate of cooperation and learning:

- By assigning responsibilities, you can encourage student leadership in online discussions.
- Introduce ice breakers and scavenger hunts whenever a new subject is introduced.
- Review the material using group-based jigsaw demonstrations.
- Request that learners include photos with their presented materials.
- Students should be required to build and maintain an online portfolio, and then provide links for the other students to watch.

¹ Means, B., Bakia, M., & Murphy, R.. Learning Online: What Research Tells Us About Whether, When and How (1 edition). New York: Routledge, 2014.

² Lehman, R., & Conceicao, S.. Motivating and Retaining Online Students: Research-Based Strategies That Work (1st ed.). Josey-Bass, 2014.

³ <https://www.blendedlearning.org/models/>

⁴ Poirier, S., A Hybrid Course Design: The Best of Both Educational Worlds. Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers, 2011, 85(6), 28–30.

Universal design for learning. Data gathered globally and from academic literature indicate an increase in demand for virtual learning environments. There are more students and more needs as a result of that growth. It is the duty of the instructor to take into account all students' needs when creating an online learning environment. The *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* principles can be used to address many of the instructional tactics that were previously covered. The concept known as “universal design for learning” (UDL), created by Meyer and Rose, “is based on scientific insights into how humans learn and is intended to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people.”⁵

Most people naturally associate special education and assistive technology with UDL when they hear the phrase. The actual focus of UDL is on serving the needs of all students while utilizing effective pedagogy (in traditional or online contexts) and high-quality, research-based instructional approaches. To guarantee that all learners can access and engage in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities, UDL standards provide a collection of practical recommendations that can be applied to any field or area. These recommendations are constantly changing as more is discovered about how individuals learn. Many modes of participation, representation, and expression are among the UDL tenets.

The “**why**” of learning is referred to when **many modes of interaction** are provided. The use of various engagement strategies is part of this, and these strategies may include giving participants choices for **recruiting curiosity, sustaining dedication, perseverance, and self-regulation**. When it comes to the online setting, some possible techniques might include:

- ✓ co-creating a vision, objective, or purpose with students;
- ✓ offering various routes to the same learning objective;
- ✓ developing instruments for reflection and self-evaluation;
- ✓ letting students forecast results for tasks or exams.

Notwithstanding the tactics employed, the main objective of offering several opportunities for participation is to provide each learner a sense of direction and motivation.

We carefully examined the UDL principle while getting ready for experimental teaching at Gavar State University, which calls for “many modes of representation” and relates to the “what” of learning. This has to do with how the course material is presented. Options for **observation, language, concepts,** and **comprehension** should be available. The following factors were taken into account when constructing our online content:

- reducing distractions through a YouTube educational video;
- watching instructive films with closed captions;
- making presentations that aren't distracting and suffocated in colours;
- using materials other than words, such as infographics;
- presenting concise summaries of key concepts in difficult topics.

These techniques are crucial both in the traditional classroom and in the online learning environment, where the aim is to develop **resourceful** and **informed students**. This is simpler for instructors because of the use of technology.

Providing various ways of expression, which addresses the “how” of learning, is the third and final tenet of UDL. According to this principle, educators have a duty to give students opportunities for **physical movement, language, communication,** and **executive functions**. These are some possible methods for tackling these ideas:

- offering a variety of access points for content and materials (interactive e-books)
- letting students respond in different ways (audio, video, drawing, etc.)
- reading and writing while using scaffolding

⁵ <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

- utilizing interactive web resources (annotation software, storyboards, etc.).

To level the playing field for all learners and to enable the learner to properly (or effectively) convey ideas, knowledge, and principles in the learning environment, multiple modalities for expression must be made available.

Regardless of the setting, UDL is a teaching strategy that employs optimal pedagogical principles; nevertheless, the use of technology streamlines UDL procedures for both instructors and students. In an effort to reach all students, regardless of their academic (or social) needs, pedagogy must be changed.

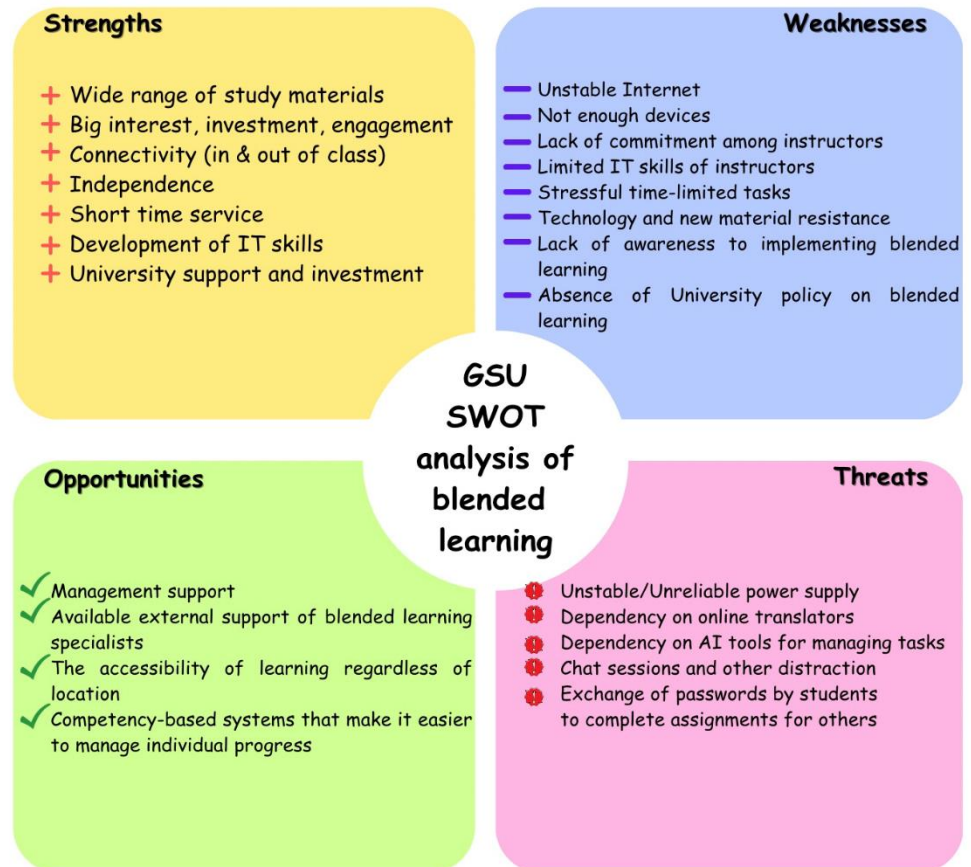
SWOT analysis. During the research at Gavar State University a SWOT analysis was conducted among fourth-year English language and Literature students. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. A person or organization can use the SWOT analysis (also known as the SWOT matrix) to identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOTs) related to business competition or project planning. Situational analysis or situational evaluation are other names for it.⁶ SWOT was chosen as the pre-analysis for an experimental teaching since it is referred to as a tested tool of strategic analysis.

In Gavar State University thoughts on blended learning as well as reflections on COVID era distance learning were taken into consideration. Students seem to really like the idea of blended learning as it combines the online and face-to-face environments which we shall cover in a bit. However, when talking about their experiences whilst using solely online environment during COVID, they had very scanty positive opinions. The only plus for them was the “home” environment, the fact that they avoided daily public transportations and of course the weather. Apart from these, students were very dissatisfied with some of their instructors and how they managed their courses. One student even noted that the curriculum did not correspond with the University curriculum and was way harder for them to manage their tasks. This was because the instructor added details that were hard and unnecessary for a student to comprehend and make use of without being given a thorough explanation. Some students complained about others’ cheating during a zoom meeting, i.e., reading the material from the screen and getting the same or higher marks as the ones who were sincere. However, when asked “what would you suggest?” all of the students answered, that the combination of both online and face-to-face would be very helpful, i.e., they are prone and ready to move on to a blended learning curriculum.

The following figure illustrates the results of the SWOT analysis based on our observations in Gavar State University.

⁶ Wehrich, Heinz "The TOWS matrix—a tool for situational analysis". Long Range Planning, April 1982, 15 (2): 54–66.

Figure 1. Results of the SWOT analysis.



As we gather from the data above, we see that students are effected by the use of technology and resources of blended learning. When making suggestions for online learning all of the students were not siding with solely online approach as the long term traditional methods have been deeply rooted in them. They were more excited to blend the two, thus making it clear that blended learning is the solution for effective learning environment.

CONCLUSION

A potential concept called blended learning has brought together a number of important sectors, including instructional design, educational technology, and online teaching and learning. As a method of teaching and learning English, blended learning has drawn a lot of interest in the ESL/EFL environment. According to research, employing mixed learning as opposed to simply traditional or online teaching methods provides various advantages for both the learning environment and the students. The process of learning English will be upgraded, language skills will be developed, and the environment for learning English will be improved, among other advantages.

The results of our research came to prove the hypotheses put forward during our research

According to the overall objective of the research and based on the data gained at the stage of observation and preparation for implementing blended learning strategies in a foreign language class at Gavar State University, the following conclusions have been drawn:

1. Our research demonstrates that blended learning can be used to effectively increase the language competence of English language learners in the setting of EFL. According to our reviewed studies, language instructors can use blended learning as a teaching strategy to help students hone their literacy, i.e, writing, reading, speaking, listening and vocabulary.
2. The adoption of blended learning has been associated with raising student engagement and motivation. Language learners can communicate both within and outside of the classroom by

combining traditional and online teaching methods. The aforementioned active and passive studies at Gavar State University demonstrated how this kind of instruction helps students learn languages and increases their participation and engagement.

3. While designing a blended learning experience for learners, the establishment of a community and culture of learning and growth is one of the most crucial aspects we should take into account. Designing Blended Learning based on the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be a perfect initial step towards the implementation of blended learning strategies into the educational process.

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ՀԱՄԱԿՑՎԱԾ ՈՒՍՈՒՑՄԱՆ ԿԻՐԱՌՄԱՄԲ ՕՏԱՐ ԼԵԶՎԻ ԴԱՍԻ ՄՇՏԱԴԻՏԱՐԿՈՒՄ ԵՎ ՆԱԽԱՊԱՏՐԱՍՏՈՒՄ

ՕՀԱՆՅԱՆ ԱՐՄԱՆ

ԳՊՀ բանասիրական ֆակուլտետի անգլերեն լեզվի և գրականության բաժնի մագիստրատուրայի շրջանավարտ
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ՍԱՐԳՍՅԱՆ ՌՈՒԶԱՆՆԱ

ՀՊՏՀ լեզուների ամբիոնի դոցենտ,
ԳՊՀ օտար լեզվի և գրականության ամբիոնի դասախոս,
մանկավարժական գիտությունների թեկնածու, դոցենտ

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Սույն հոդվածի գլխավոր նպատակն է ներկայացնել դիտարկման և նախապատրաստման փուլում ձեռք բերված արդյունքները՝ Գավառի պետական համալսարանում օտար լեզվի դասին համակցված ուսուցման ռազմավարությունների իրականացման համար: Հետազոտության ընթացքում կիրառվել են հետևյալ մեթոդները՝ տեսական, սոցիալ-մանկավարժական, փորձարարական, վիճակագրական, SWOT վերլուծություն: Հետազոտության արդյունքները հաստատում են հետազոտության ընթացքում առաջ քաշված վարկածները. 1) Եթե համակցված ուսուցումը իրականացվում է անգլերենի՝ որպես օտար լեզվի ուսուցման ընթացքում, այն զարգացնում է անգլերեն սովորողների լեզվական կոմպետենցիան: 2) Եթե ներդրվում է համակցված ուսուցումը, այն կարող է բարձրացնել սովորողների ներգրավվածությունը և մոտիվացիայի մակարդակը: Մեր հետազոտությունները ցույց են տալիս, որ համակցված ուսուցումը կարող է օգտագործվել անգլերեն սովորողների լեզվական կոմպետենցիան զարգացնելու համար: Համակցված ուսուցման կիրառումը

անմիջականորեն կապված է սովորողների ներգրավվածության և մոտիվացիայի մակարդակի բարձրացման հետ: Համակցված ուսուցումը նախագծելիս անհրաժեշտ է հաշվի առնել դասավանդողների և սովորողների համայնքի ստեղծումը, ուսումնառության համապատասխան մշակույթի ձևավորումը, ինչպես նաև UDL (universal design for learning, ուսումնառության ունիվերսալ դիզայն) կոնցեպցիայի հիմնական դրույթները:

Բանալի բառեր՝ օրար լեզվի դասավանդում, ուսումնառություն, անգլերենը որպես օրար լեզու, համակցված ուսուցում, համակցված ուսուցման նախագծում:

НАБЛЮДЕНИЯ И ПОДГОТОВКА К СМЕШАННОМУ ОБУЧЕНИЮ НА УРОКЕ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА

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Основная цель данной статьи – представить результаты, полученные на этапе наблюдения и подготовки к реализации стратегий смешанного обучения на уроке иностранного языка в Гаварском государственном университете. В ходе исследования использовались следующие методы: теоретический, социально-педагогический, экспериментальный, статистический, SWOT анализ. Результаты исследования подтвердили гипотезы, выдвинутые в ходе нашего исследования: 1) Если внедрять смешанное обучение в обучении английского как иностранного (EFL), оно повышает языковую компетенцию изучающих английский язык в условиях EFL. 2) Если применять смешанное обучение, оно может повысить мотивацию учащихся и их активную вовлеченность в учебный процесс. Проведенное нами исследование демонстрирует, что смешанное обучение может быть использовано для развития языковой компетенции изучающих английский язык в условиях EFL. Внедрение смешанного обучения напрямую связано с повышением вовлеченности и мотивации учащихся. При разработке уроков с применением стратегий смешанного обучения следует учитывать создание сообщества (обучающих и обучающихся) и формирование соответствующей культуры обучения, а также положения концепции универсального дизайна для обучения (UDL).

Ключевые слова: обучение иностранному языку, английский как иностранный (EFL), смешанное обучение, разработка смешанного обучения.

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