



Research Article

THE ENHANCEMENT OF CULTURAL AWARENESS IN ESP CONTEXT: BLENDED LEARNING MIGHT BE A KEY FACTOR

Le Dinh Tung

Ho Chi Minh City University of Education

Corresponding author: Le Dinh Tung – Email: tungld@hcmue.edu.vn

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the correlation of cultural awareness and blended learning in which an educator in charge of a tourism class can raise students' cultural communicative competence together with their understanding of global culture. The results of the study show that the blended-learning method in teaching and learning ESP helps learners to be completely aware of the extensive cultural issues mentioned in the curriculum in an active and effective way. with traditional classroom teaching methods. Thanks to this, learners can be more proactive in acquiring linguistic knowledge and specific cultural issues of the subject to improve communicative competence in today's global environment.

Keywords: blended learning; cultural awareness; ESP

1. Introduction

In the present day, as English has been an international language, studying this language is one of the goals for students to achieve in their schoolings. EFL (English as a foreign language) learners have to struggle for understanding and application to practice since they encounter numerous objective and subjective difficulties. However, due to the curriculum, undergraduate students in higher education have to continue their ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course – a compulsory one - in relation to their specialized areas of study to graduate. It is an obvious fact that the teaching and learning English is to make students competent in language use, particularly in communication. It is widely convinced that communicative competence is one of the most necessary factors to achieve success in international business in this competitive world although each skill of English is to enable learners to perform effectively at work and academic environment.

As an ESP course integrates linguistic skills and specific contents, learners with a high command of English can perform more effectively in their majors (Davis, 1993).

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However, due to difficulties in ESP teaching and learning (Barjesteh & Shakeri, 2013), there has been a great shortage of teachers who are qualified enough to teach specialized contents (Hyland, 2002; Wu & Badger, 2009) together with their cooperation (Helsvig, 2012) and unsuitable course books (Sierocka, 2008; Ahmadi & Bajelani, 2012), which has greatly challenged ESP teaching and learning in the modern world.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Blended learning.

In non-native English-speaking countries, English is included as a compulsory subject in all grades in education but there is no authentic English-speaking environment for learners to practice (Kwon, Shih, Renandya, & Koike, 2000). The requirements of using English outside the classroom have challenged educators to encourage their learners to be exposed to practical linguistic experiences to support traditional teaching and learning approaches (Parker, Heitzman, Fjerstad, Babbs, & Cohen, 1995; You, 2003). Since the arrival of CALL and the Internet, the interactions between teachers and learners or amongst students have brought significant motivations in language learning (Peterson, 2009). With the advancement in voice recognition and communication, communicative skills can be improved effectively (Mahfouz & Ihmeideh, 2009), which can promote the confidence and fluency (Abuseileek, 2007; Stewart & File, 2007). As the purpose is to create and develop such an environment close to the target language and its culture, the authentic materials, and interactive methodology are required to motivate learners to learn proficient English (Wu, Yen & Marek, 2011). Blended learning, the innovative approach, has proved itself advantageous to facilitate learners with comprehension of the usage and connotations of cultural references.

2.2. Intercultural communicative competence.

Communicative competence is considered as the knowledge of rules of grammar and those of language used in a certain context. This conceptualization of communicative competence has been furthered (Usó Juan, & Martínez Flor, 2008) since scholars have tried to categorize and simplify as grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse and pragmatic competence which was later included and described as sociocultural rules of use. Intercultural communicative competence mainly refers to “the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). In other words, when learners interact with others whose background and origin may significantly differ, they can comprehend the messages delivered through dialogs.

2.3. The impact of cultural awareness on cross-cultural communication.

Cultural awareness (CA) is considered as “individuals exhibiting functional awareness of the degree to which behaviors are informed and influenced by culture” (Schram, 1994). That is, a single person needs linguistic knowledge to successfully

undertake intercultural communication and recognize the cultural dimension of communicative competence. Defined, CA is a conscious comprehension of how culture affects language learning and communication. It has been widely agreed that a systematic framework for teaching culture together with language could help learners explore the culture within the linguistic contexts.

3. Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the correlation between cultural awareness and blended learning in ESP, particularly a course for tourism. The requirements of effective and appropriate interaction and communication with other cultures bring this matter to ESP teachers and learners. The new approach is to enhance learners' productivity together with integrated culture awareness within the course.

4. Methodology

4.1. Population

This study was conducted in a tourism class in Vietnam. This ESP course is required for junior and senior students to graduate from university. There were 50 students (25 males and 25 females) allocated for the research. All of them have passed the three compulsory modules, in General, English at university, and their English level is around Pre-Intermediate. However, their communicative skills were inadequate for interacting with native speakers.

The participants were third-year students who were studying the ESP course at university. They were given a survey in that their background could be clearly examined for the research. The statistics indicated the appropriateness of participants to be included in the study with a high frequency of using technology, and the level of English was average at this learning stage.

Table 1. The Collected data of the participants

Factor	Percentage		Factors	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>	Male	50%	Female	50%
<i>CEFR level</i>	B1	36%	A1-A2	64%
<i>Frequent usage of electronic devices</i>	PCs & Laptops	90%	Smartphones & Tablets	60%
<i>Internet access</i>	Male	80%	Female	65%

4.2. Measurement and Data Collection

Participants were given a pre-test after a lesson about niche tourism – a specific lesson in the course book that they were studying at university. They were allocated randomly for the test to guarantee the reliability of the results after the test. Participants were encouraged to access the online platforms which were created for further practice when they finished the class. Terminologies and reading passages about the topic were

recommended so that learners could have access to these authentic materials. The post-test was given in the following day when participants had to perform to show how much they absorbed the knowledge about the niche tourism and how many lexical items they could remember the lesson.

The ANOVA (One-way) Analysis and Critical Text Analysis were used to analyze the improvement in language learning and their cultural awareness included in the linguistic context.

The figure 1 below shows how the study was conducted. Thanks to the authentic materials given in the ESP course, particularly the course English for Tourism, participants with diverse backgrounds could be exposed to. Through the assignments (in-class activities and online learning environment), ESP learners could share their knowledge in contexts about cultural issues and raise their intercultural communicative competence. The interaction amongst students can be of great help to encourage themselves to promote their cultural awareness and language competence. After the learning and testing phases, the utmost objectives could be achieved.

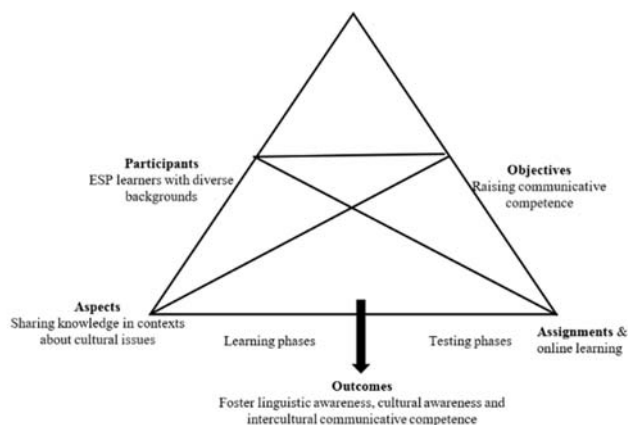


Figure 1. *The theoretical framework of the research tool authentic materials related to tourism subfields*

4.3. Analytical design

Participants were required to take two separate tests at two different times. The results in the below table indicate how well students perform their tests. The improvement score implied the betterment in language awareness and their knowledge of cultural issues as students were given the new approach.

Table 2. Pre-test and Post-test score

	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Total possible	Improvement Mean
Culture Quizzes	10	18	20	80%
Lexical items	12	15	20	25%
Reading comprehension	19	28	30	47%
Listening	10	13	15	30%
Writing	7	11	15	57%
Total	58	85	100	47%

The two assessments above were studied the statistics were then analyzed by ANOVA (one factor) to examine the effectiveness of the tests and this research.

Table 3. Mean report of the two tests

	(Mean)	(SD)
Pre-test	38.86	29.46
Post-test	41.38	31.35

Table 4. ANOVA analysis of the differences between the assessments

	Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value
Pre-test	Between Groups	120460.30	7	17208.61	292.27	.001
	Within Groups	11775.83	200	58.88		
	Total	132236.13	207			
Post-test	Between Groups	50482.80	7	7211.83	9.12	.001
	Within Groups	158240.83	200	791.20		
	Total	208723.63	207			

During the study, participants were carefully observed regarding which interest they would like to find out more in their major. The frequency could be recorded through the database in the online environment. The statistics in Table 5 clearly show this concern.

Table 5. Learners' interests in tourism subfields

Subfields	Frequency	Percentage
English for travelling	40	80%
English for hospitality	32	64%
English for catering	18	36%
World Culture	45	90%

5. Results and Discussions

Table 2 showed the pre-test and post-test score of the research. Critical text analysis

was employed to work out the two tests and how students improved their competence. In the pre-test, it could be clearly seen that learners averaged 58 of a possible (maximum) 100 points. In the post-test, they could boost their average score to 85 out of a possible (maximum) 100 points with an overall improvement of nearly 47%.

The result also indicated that cultural awareness dramatically increased in the post-test with the improvement of 80%. The blended learning helped students to increase their score with questions about culture.

With the means in Table 3 increase gradually (from 38.86 to 41.38), it can be argued that there was a stable and gradual increase from the pre-test to the post-test. As shown in Table 4, the result of ANOVA test show $F(1)=292.27 > F(2) = 9.12$ and the P-values were at the 0.001 level. Because the difficulty levels of the two tests were less than 0.05, the result implied that learners made a great improvement in assessments of linguistic competence. The results also proved the effectiveness and usefulness of intercultural communicative competence in the blended learning. The results in Table 5 show how much-interested learners were in tourism subfield. The highest percentage (90%) was the world culture, which is not a surprise since they were expected to equip themselves with a wide range of knowledge about the global culture for their studies and future career. The second highest was about the linguistic awareness regarding cultural awareness; in order words, the intercultural communicative competence was learners' concerns when they were supposed to communicate with native speakers or foreign tourists in their professions.

In this research, the theoretical framework was carried out through two tests and surveys to examine the correlation between the cultural awareness and blended learning in improving students' communicative competence. The individual and collaborative activities throughout the study supported learners to participate and involve more in the field. The data collected and analyzed indicated that language awareness could be better achieved through the blended learning rather than the traditional methodology.

The culture awareness could be fostered thanks to the materials were given and the approach taken when learners were supposed to explore and obtain by themselves. Learners' autonomy was one of the potential objectives that the research wanted to aim at since the assignments set had to be completed by individuals or groups rather than teachers or instructors delivered directly through in-class lessons. Further researches were conducted by students when they wanted to explore thanks to their motivation and interests rather than compulsion.

The blended learning was of importance in this research because it promoted the positive and active learning. It also combined a variety of learning activities from different individuals effectively so that students were encouraged to become independent learners who were able to control their learning objectives, strategies, and assessments.

6. Implications and further research

This study proved the effectiveness of the new blended learning method to increase cultural awareness in ESP courses. The appropriate use of this methodology could bring great benefits for both educators and learners. The wide application in other ESP courses, such as English for literature course or English for geography in universities can bring greater achievement.

However, due to the limitation of the study, some of the suggestions for further research should be mentioned. First, the population could be expanded with more participants from other universities rather than the single context. Second, the duration of the study should be extended to observe and examine how learners' linguistic and cultural awareness improved. Third, more assessments should be employed to analyze some other factors that could influence language learning and application into practice.

7. Conclusion

The research provided the above-mentioned results to indicate that learners' linguistic and cultural awareness could be achieved and raised better through blended learning methodology. The intercultural communicative competence was improved since learners were given opportunities to interact and exchange information among themselves. The computer-assisted learning environment also involved students in intercultural communication in raising their language awareness. Many of the subfields of tourism were offered so that students could share knowledge through learning resources such as materials, discussion or online collaboration. The peer-learning played an important role in promoting learners' autonomy and knowledge achievement. The blended learning is the key factor that helps to raise culture awareness in this ESP course.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Author have no conflict of interest to declare.

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**SỰ NÂNG CAO NHẬN THỨC VĂN HÓA TRONG BỐI CẢNH
TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH: VIỆC HỌC KẾT HỢP CÓ THỂ
LÀ MỘT YẾU TỐ THEN CHỐT**

Lê Đình Tùng

Trường Đại học Sư phạm Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

Tác giả liên hệ: Lê Đình Tùng – Email: tungld@hcmue.edu.vn

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết này tìm hiểu mối tương quan của nhận thức về văn hóa và phương pháp học tập kết hợp, trong đó, giáo viên phụ trách một lớp chuyên ngành du lịch có thể giúp sinh viên nâng cao năng lực giao tiếp văn hóa cùng sự hiểu biết về văn hóa toàn cầu. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra phương pháp học kết hợp trong việc dạy và học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành giúp cho người học nhận thức các vấn đề văn hóa sâu rộng được đề cập trong chương trình học một cách chủ động và hiệu quả so với các phương pháp dạy trên lớp truyền thống. Từ đó, người học có thể chủ động hơn trong việc tiếp nhận kiến thức ngôn ngữ và các vấn đề văn hóa đặc thù của môn học để nâng cao năng lực giao tiếp trong môi trường toàn cầu ngày nay.

Từ khóa: học kết hợp; nhận thức văn hóa; tiếng Anh chuyên ngành