

Using blended learning to help EFL students to reach B1 level

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Elsa Yolanda Cruz Maldonado

Doctor in Education

Institution: Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas

Address: Blvd. Belisario Domínguez Km. 1081, Sin Número, Terán, 29050 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chis.,
México

E-mail: elsa.cruz@unach.mx

Adrián de Jesús Girón Chávez

Doctor in Education

Institution: Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas

Address: Blvd. Belisario Domínguez Km. 1081, Sin Número, Terán, 29050 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chis.,
México

E-mail: adrián.girón@unach.mx

María Magdalena Bermejo del Villar

Doctor in Education

Institution: Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas

Address: Blvd. Belisario Domínguez Km. 1081, Sin Número, Terán, 29050 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chis.,
México

E-mail: maria.bermejo@unach.mx

Rocio Cancino Zamarrón

Master in Education

Institution: Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas

Address: Blvd. Belisario Domínguez Km. 1081, Sin Número, Terán, 29050 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chis.,
México

E-mail: rocio.cancino@unach.mx

Edna Edhenny Maldonado Cruz

Master in Education

Institution: Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas

Address: Blvd. Belisario Domínguez Km. 1081, Sin Número, Terán, 29050 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chis.,
México

E-mail: edna.maldonado@unach.mx

ABSTRACT

This research studies the implementation of blended learning in the case of a third semester group of students of English Language Teaching Bachelor Degree. The study was held in the State University of Chiapas, specifically in the Language School of Tapachula. These students were invited to participate in this project in order to determine the efficacy of the blended learning in the preparation for the PET. The methodology used in this research was an experimental method applied from a quantitative-descriptive approach. The subjects of the study were BA in ELT students of the Language School of Tapachula. Two PET exams were applied, one before the study and another at the end of the study. In the middle of the research, the students received both, face to face and online sessions along with questionnaires, surveys

and interviews. This research affirms that blended learning offers several benefits for those students who show commitment with their learning goals, however, some students did not show any progress in most of the cases due to their lack of dedication.

Keywords: blended learning, mixed modality groups, preliminary English Test.

1 INTRODUCTION

Studying the educational program of the Bachelor of Arts in English Language Teaching represents an important challenge for those who make the decision of doing it. It can become even more challenging if international language certifications, such as the Preliminary English Test, are taking into account. This evaluation represents an element of difficulty for students. Consequently, it is not surprising to note that university students look for different resources that can help them improve their development in such an important test.

This study seeks to show how students from the third semester of the B.A in English Language Teaching at Universidad Autonoma de Chiapas (UNACH for its initials in Spanish) took part in a blended learning method. This study was undertaken during the period August- December 2019 in order to prepare students for the Preliminary English Test (PET) and to know each part that this international exam presents to get the B1 level, according to the Common European Framework as Reference for Languages (CEFR). This preparation course was complementary for the students, additional to their regular English classes. In this course, students used a platform where they could improve all their language skills; moreover, some face to face classes were taken in which students could do exercises related to specific points of the exam.

The Preliminary English Test (PET) is one of the exams needed as a permanency requirement in third semester of the Bachelor Program. The PET evaluates the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking; it examines these skills in order to know how the candidate produces and manages the language. This is because as future English teachers, learners must reach certain English proficiency levels according to CEFR in their scholar trajectory: B1 level to pass to fourth semester, and B2 in order to get their college degree; however, there are students who do not succeed in passing the B1 exam and as a consequence, their studies are paused for one term until they take the exam for a second time to pass it and then continue their studies. In case they do not pass the examination in the second opportunity, students' records are deleted from the program and they will have to start from the first semester if they wish to continue. This paper provides an overview of success factors that are starting to emerge from the literature, research and our practice. It also offers some suggestions for future researches on autonomy, motivation and self-regulation, which are not commonly studied topics in Mexican schools.

2 CONTEXTUALIZING THE PROBLEM

This research takes place at the Language School, Campus Tapachula of the State University of Chiapas, which is located in the city of Tapachula, Chiapas. The state of Chiapas is one of the most splendid and powerful city-states of Maya civilization. It is divided into 124 municipalities and the weather in general is humid and tropical. Chiapas has different types of flora and fauna, and these are some of the most attractive aspects of the state as well as the diversity of cultures that each entity has.

Statistically, this state shows a high rate of illiterate people and according to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, 2015), the 14.6% for each 100 people between 15 and more years old do not have any school grade, the 57.2% have their basic studies, such as primary school or secondary school, the 16.4% finished high school and the 11.7% have a college degree. Many of these people prefer working to studying, and this is because the poverty they face each day; they only usually receive basic education since they cannot afford further studies. While some people only complete their basic studies, there are others who start a bachelor degree in one of the different universities that the state provides to the community. In Chiapas, there is a good amount of universities, the majority of them are public and in these ones the students have the opportunity to study a bachelor degree depending on their interests and likes they have without having to invest a lot of money.

One of the most important universities in the state is the Universidad Autonoma de Chiapas (UNACH), where students can choose any of the areas they prefer. One of the schools that this university has is the Language School Campus Tapachula, which was founded in 1974. This school offers different language courses, such as English, French, Italian, and German; the most required is English and that is the reason why there are English courses for children, teenagers and adults. Furthermore, it also provides the English Teaching as a bachelor degree, where the students are trained to teach the language with the strategies, methods and pedagogy that is needed.

3 BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning is a term that lacks a unified definition, but its conceptualization involves the addition of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which refer to a range of information technologies that are primarily used for information retrieval and communication purposes. Garrison & Vaughan (2008:148) define this modality as the “organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face to face and online approaches and technologies.” The best example to this would using the Internet for creating tasks that allow students’ learning experience go beyond the walls of a classroom.

For this research paper, blended learning is a term applied to the practice of providing instruction and learning experiences combining face-to-face classes with online technology-based learning

(Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). This learning practice involves students attending a class taught by a teacher, who is a guide to solve activities and doubts immediately in a classroom. Additionally, they complete online exercises independently or on an online learning platform where they are able to interact and do activities by their own, and consulting the teacher if it is necessary.

Blended learning has potential to improve learning. This modality has many benefits on the account of the extra material students can get access via online and the comfort of doing all of them from any place of their preference. It incorporates direct instruction, indirect instruction, collaborative teaching, and individualized computer-assisted learning. According to Stacey and Gerbic (2008), there is now a new landscape in educational technology where physical and virtual environments are blended to support learning in university courses. On the other hand, there are also challenges in blending learning, especially in responding to the complexity of two environments and embedding it as a legitimate learning environment. Owing to the novelty of the blended learning concept in higher education, little is known about what makes a successful blended learning experience in the state of Chiapas. This is why more research must be done in higher education institutions with the appropriate facilitation to allow both modalities of learning into one course.

The concept blended learning has become a fashion expression in many instructive environments in the last few years, it generally refers to courses that incorporate a mixture of the face to face and online modalities. (Graham, 2013). In the last 10 years, learning and collaboration technology have presented advantages in different aspects, some of them are effectiveness, convenience and low cost. With the enormous challenge of satisfying the needs of the millennial students who attend to higher education classrooms, teachers face the dilemma of creating a learning environment according to the demands of this special audience and at the same time according to the purpose of passing permanency evaluations and completing a university program.

4 METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this project was the experimental method from a quantitative-descriptive perspective. Plano Clark and Ivankova (2006) claim that mixed methods research require a purposeful mixing of methods in data collection, data analysis and interpretation of the evidence. The key word is 'mixed', as an essential step in the mixed methods approach is data linkage, or integration at an appropriate stage in the research process.

This method was selected based on the nature of the research problem. It was necessary to combine both quantitative and descriptive research to gather all the information required by collecting data through a pre-test and a post-test, and also by combining face-to-face classes and online classes. On the other hand, this work seeks to answer research questions and includes graphics to exemplify students' progress with

regard to their skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking development in order for them to pass the PET exam.

In order to determine the efficiency of blender learning to help ELT learners to reach English B1 level according to CEFRL, third semester students at the Language School Campus Tapachula will take a first PET exam as a diagnostic test. The results of the first exam will provide some insight of what the students' needs are, their strengths and weaknesses in their writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Then, students will take a mixed modality course for preparing them for PET exam for three months. In this course, students will perform tasks specially designed to develop their grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading on the educational platform called EDMODO. These tasks will be online and students will be able to complete them from any place they want and at the most convenient time for them. Since this course has a mixed modality, there will also be face to face additional classes for clarifying doubts, developing speaking, and taking simulated PET exams for practice. In the end, a final PET exam will be applied to determine how effective blended learning was for the students who took the course.

5 DATA ANALYSIS

The participants of this study were 20 undergraduate students from third semester of the B.A in English Teaching Degree from August to December 2019. There were 15 females and 5 males. All of them took a PET exam on May 14th, 2019 as a diagnostic test in order to learn about their strengths and weaknesses before taking the mixed modality course. Nonetheless, a lack of interest in most of the participants was observed: only six students (4 females and 2 males) agreed on taking the mixed modality course from beginning to end. Their scores obtained in this first PET exam are presented in Chart 1.

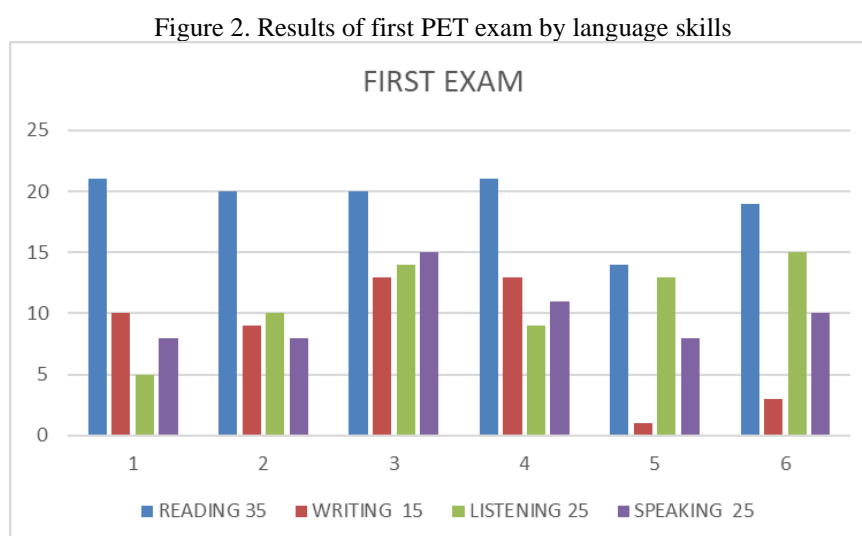
Figure 1. Results of first PET exam

Language Skill:	READING	WRITING	LISTENING	SPEAKING	FINAL
Total score:	35	15	25	25	100
1.Student A	20	9	10	8	47
2.Student B	21	10	5	8	44
3.Student C	20	13	14	15	62
4.Student D	21	13	9	11	54
5. Student E	14	1	13	8	36
6.Student F	19	3	15	10	47

As seen in Figure 1, none of the six students that took the diagnostic test had an approving score of 70 points, being 62 the highest mark. In general, students had very low scores, being 48 the general average. These results evidence the need to help these students to improve their language level and develop their language skills. They are unprepared to passing a PET exam, which means they will not be able to pass the permanency exam for their university studies.

Regarding their language skills, it can be easily noticed that reading is their strongest skill, as appreciated in Figure 2. On the other hand, writing is their weakest as they had little practice in this skill, while listening is the second weakest due to a lack of listening strategies. These scores are evidence that regular classes are not enough to help these students develop their language skills. They need to continue practicing the target language outside their classroom. This is why a mix of face to face classes with online tasks is a better option for these learners, as they would expand their study time.

Based on these results, the mixed modality course was designed. The six students who had agreed on participating in this research project had access to EDMODO, the digital educational platform where they could do listening and writing exercises with a similar format as the PET exam. Grammar and vocabulary exercises were also available for students. In ten face to face sessions, these six students performed tasks to develop their speaking, and they also took simulated PET exams.



After three months, the six students completed the mixed modality course. These students showed different percentages of improvement in the language abilities that the PET exam measures. During the course, the participants showed constancy, as they attended every face to face class and completed all the online tasks in EDMODO. Their motivation increased slowly, as they could see better results in the simulated exams they took as practice. Their confidence also improved, especially during the speaking tasks. It could be observed that these students felt more confident with every PET exam practice; this was because they had learned strategies they could apply to answer their test. For instance, it was very common that students wanted to understand as many words as they could during the listening exercises, causing them stress and frustration. Once they learned about listening strategies, they did not try to understand every word and they focused on the key words depending on the exam question. This resulted in better scores and an increase on student's confidence about the permanency evaluation.

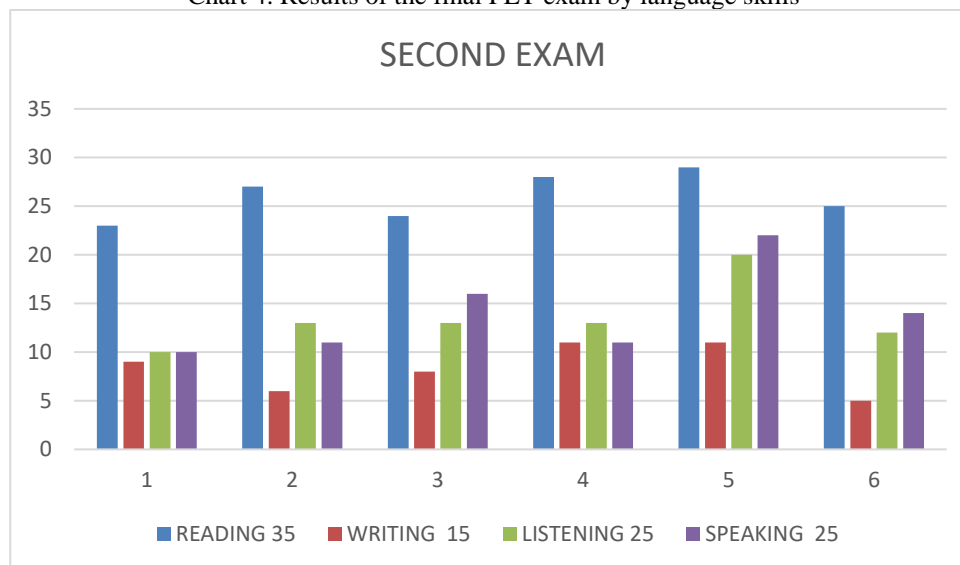
At the end of the mixed modality course, the six students took a final PET exam on November 19th, 2019. Their scores can be seen in Figure 3. The general average of these results is 62, 14 points higher than the general average in the first PET exam, before taking the course. The highest score was 82, 20 points higher than the highest result obtained in the diagnostic exam. This improvement was also seen in every student's score. For example, Student E showed a decisive improvement: from 36 to 82; other two students, B and D show a discrete improvement from 44 to 61 and from 54 to 63 points respectively. Two students, A and F, showed improvement even though their score was not enough to pass the permanency exam. On the other hand, it was a surprise to observe that Student C actually got a lower result (10 points lower). This student must definitely keep practicing and work on her confidence during the exam.

Figure 3. Results of final PET exam

Language Skill:	READING	WRITING	LISTENING	SPEAKING	FINAL
Total score:	35	15	25	25	100
1.Student A	27	6	13	11	57
2.Student B	24	8	13	16	61
3.Student C	23	9	10	10	52
4.Student D	28	11	13	11	63
5. Student E	29	11	20	22	82
6.Student F	25	5	12	14	56

Paying attention to the scores obtained for every section language skill in the final PET exam at the end of the course, a clear improvement can also be observed. As seen in Figure 4, students made a significant improvement in the listening section of the evaluation, especially for Student E (5), going up from 13 to 20 correct answers. Students A and B doubled their score in the speaking section, showing more confidence and a better fluency in this final exam. The writing exercises in EDMODO also proved to be helpful as there was an improvement in the writing scores: student E obtained 10 more points than in the diagnostic exam while student F increased her score with two more points. The reading skill was still their strongest language skill, as their highest scores were obtained in this section. Even though there was an improvement, writing is still their weakest language ability.

Chart 4. Results of the final PET exam by language skills



When learning about their results in the final PET exam after the mixed modality course, the five students that obtained better scores were happy and satisfied with their results. They acknowledged the extra practice given in the course helped them to improve their English and develop their language skills. They claimed that combining online exercises with face to face classes gave them more time and more exercises to practice. They also stated that getting better score was thanks to the strategies they applied during exam; the strategies they learned completing their online tasks and coming to all the classes. In contrast, Student C felt disappointed and nervous about taking the real PET exam. When asked about why she thought she had obtained a lower score, she answered she felt very nervous and forgot to apply all the strategies she had learned in the course.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is necessary to mention the usefulness of mixed modality groups since this represents the advantage of students not needing to attend PET sessions daily. The main purpose of blended learning is “optimizing the learning outcome and cost program delivery” (Singh & Reed, 2001). The activities can be sent to students through an online platform, they send their completed activities to the tutor in the same platform and they can get together once or twice a week for the oral sessions. This mixed method expands the time of attention on the class subject and economizes time and resources. However, in spite of this convenience of online work, most of the participants of this research (70%) did not finish the online activities, nor the face to face sessions. When they were asked for the reasons, autonomy was one of the key facts that emerge from this study as a need to be developed in our Mexican students. Motivation was another element that was frequently mentioned by students, as well as self-regulation.

In relation to the lack of participation of the most of the students in this project, Pardo-González (2011) found a similar program when implementing a mixed modality course for teaching English at the University of the Andes, in Colombia. When her project started in 2004, only 30 students completed the course while in 2011, 1,412 EFL learners participated. She concludes that blended learning must be seen as a gradual and ongoing process and not as a final product, since both teachers and students get familiarized with technology slowly.

It is pertinent to mention that online education has gained a great deal of importance in the last three months. Due to the national sanitary lockdown caused by the virus COVID-19, every school in Mexico had to adopt blended learning quickly. The face to face conventional classes had to be adapted to online classes, using a variety of digital platforms, such as Google Classroom, Educa-T, and even EDMODO. Both teachers and students enjoyed the benefits of blended learning, having to end the academic year using online educational tools. Given the challenge of adapting to a new educational context, blended learning will become the common modality for teaching: a combination of less often face to face classes with online tasks that help students become more autonomous in their learning.

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