

MONITORING THE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS IN BLENDED LEARNING

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The article presents the results of the international project called ALL (Autonomous Language learning) based on Blended learning course and reports on the evaluation of its effectiveness through learners' needs analysis at the initial stage of the implementation of a new approach, their feedback and evaluation of learning achievements at the end of the course. The paper also describes a new teacher's role in this innovative teaching method while using a specially designed virtual learning environment such as the website developed in this project – a platform for teachers and learners which enables teachers to communicate online with students and students with students.

Keywords: blended learning, autonomy, monitoring.

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Introduction

The term 'autonomy' has been widely discussed in different learning contexts (McGrath 2000: 100–110). The term that we have adopted in foreign language learning means an individual's desire and ability to carry out, control, evaluate and project his language activity upon mastering the tactics and strategy of autonomous language learning, as well as the basics of its autodidactics. Students acquire the basics of their autonomous studies by developing their own language learning strategies and tactics as well as picking up metacognitive skills in the learning process. Individually applied methods, without an integrated strategy and tactics, only allows an application of partly acquired learning techniques, so it is necessary to aggregate all these strategies and tactics, and synthesize all the gained knowledge into the language activity learning paradigm. In order to become autonomous, learners have to master metacog-

nitive skills covering self-direction, self-control and self-evaluation, which are further subdivided into such skills as monitoring, testing, diagnosing, repairing, evaluating, and reflecting. Blended Learning is the shortest way to make students interested in autonomous foreign language studies. This is the model combining virtual learning environment with direct tutorials. Such kind of method which is also called a mixed method in the context of foreign language learning helps to identify the need of the continuous language learning having the possibility to pay attention to changing learner's needs. That is why this method requires transferable skills, such as problem solving, communicative as well as metacognitive skills; it encourages both learner's autonomy and individual responsibility. Blended learning (BL) could be defined as a combination of face-to-face (FtF) and computer assisted learning

in a single teaching and learning environment (Neumeier 2005: 164–168).

In addition, the course building tools are extensive and allow course builders to include dynamic, news-based elements. For example, an event in the morning's news can be included in a course Unit. This increases the perceived value of the course and the immediacy, leading to an increase in motivation.

The object of our research is students' autonomous language learning process in the blended learning course. Having chosen this object, **the aim of the research** is to analyze the necessity for monitoring the language learning process using the method of blended learning.

The **methods of the research** include the analysis of methodological references, a quantitative research, statistical data analysis (SPSS-statistical package for social sciences).

The paper explores **the problem** of the monitoring process of blended language learning. Therefore, the main **hypotheses of this article** are: 1) despite being autonomous in blended language learning students need monitoring in their studies; 2) students' needs and feedback analysis should be done to foster their autonomy; 3) the usage of blended language learning enhances students' responsibility for their studies.

Teacher's and Learner's Role in Monitoring Blended Learning

Blended learning offers learners the flexibility they need to work autonomously from home, or any other place at any time that is convenient. Face- to- face classes with the course tutor are often preferred for new topics and to clarify issues brought up in previous sessions as well as for reflection and discussion about the process of learning. That is why, the realization of a new teacher's role should be taken into account. Some teaching takes place in classroom but the majority of time for studying a foreign language is outside the school. The textbook is no longer the major source of information. Some other teaching means are used to help the teacher. This may be

using email or audio- and video-conferencing through the Internet, or using a specially designed virtual learning environment such as the website developed in the project. It may also involve using the mobile phone, either for live talk or instant messaging. Nowadays, it also includes the uses of Web2 developments for social networking, such as blogs, youtube, secondlife, facebook, myspace, wikis, and many other ways in which communication among people from different language and cultures can be pursued. However, in many cases guidance or training is essential. The number of hours within the classroom and online may vary greatly according to each course, learning institution and learners' needs. Tutors may decide to spend less of their time in the classroom with their students, but instead to dedicate more time to preparing interesting new course material for use by students between classes. For instance, they might increase peer interaction through shared projects or presentations and the use of online message boards. One of the means to monitor blended learning is to have interactive communication between the students and the teacher. A learning diary on-line in a learning platform that is accessed both to students and the teacher was used in the project where blended learning approach was applied.

While trying to classify the reasons for writing a learning diary the stress could be put on four means of learning from them:

Firstly, students learn because writing a learning diary is a process that accentuates favourable conditions for learning.

Secondly, diary writing encourages reflection and reflection is associated with deep approaches to learning, or with deep learning. In deep learning, the intention of the learner is to develop a personal understanding of the material and to relate it to what is already known.

Thirdly, writing in a diary encourages metacognition, it develops metacognitive skills which are generally divided into two types: *self-assessment* (the ability to assess one's own cognition) and *self-management* (the ability to manage one's further cognitive development) (Rivers 2001: 279–290). Successful learners

employ a range of metacognitive skills and effective teachers of young adults attend to the development of these skills. Hacker (1998: 15–18) concludes that definitions of need include “knowledge of one’s knowledge, processes and cognitive and affective states” and “ability to consciously monitor and regulate one’s knowledge, processes, cognitive and affective states”. It is likely that much free writing in diaries will contain some metacognition and if a learning diary is structured, then metacognition can be built in.

Lastly, the act of writing is associated with learning or the enhancement of learning. It forces a learner to clarify his or her thoughts, to provide feedback, to focus attention and tell the learner if s/he does or does not understand. Keeping a learning diary will help the teacher to monitor the autonomous learning and report on the progress made by learners. A learning diary is a good source of students’ needs and feedback.

Recent methodology resources present several approaches to needs analysis. Pauline Robinson (1991: 15) and R. R. Jordan (1997: 20–21) single out target-situation analysis (TSA). This Munby’s approach focuses on the students’ needs at the end of a language course, and target-level performance. P. Robinson states the fact that TSA may pinpoint the stage at which “good enough” competence for the required job or studies is reached. A present-situation analysis (PSA) gives information about students’ knowledge – their strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of the course. A Learning-centred approach was distinguished by Hutchinson and Waters. They see the difference between learner-centred and learning-centred. “Learner-centred infers that learning is totally determined by the learner (and thus probably does not truly exist), whereas learning-centred involves learning as a process of negotiation between individuals and society (which includes teaching, syllabus, methods, materials, etc.)” R. R. Jordan (1997: 24). In blended learning self-directed student is in the centre of a learning process. Self-directedness starts with learners’ needs analysis which could be considered the first source for a new curriculum design and the self-evaluation of their own skills.

While monitoring the blended language learning process learners are asked to assess themselves and provide the feedback the results of which are evaluated to construct continuous activities.

As assessment is the formal outcome of learning process, the diaries are taken here as a form of formative assessment not summative because they are described in the context of the improvement of learning. Learning journals, logs and reflective diaries are terms often used interchangeably. However, the purposes of them may differ slightly. When keeping a learning journal, the emphasis is on making explicit and recording the learning that occurs. Diaries are more concerned with demonstrating reflection on an experience, while logs are a record of events that have happened. They usually, however, all have an aspect of reflection in them.

The diaries are taken here as a form of self-assessment as well. Students are given much responsibility for their studies, the progress they make and self-monitoring. Learners are obliged to provide their reports, to log on every time they have a virtual lesson, to complete the tasks on time. They are given much freedom in terms of time management and perform all the activities at their own pace. Self-projecting of their own studies is also learners’ responsibility. The feedback on a certain activity provided by the teacher and formal assessment on the progress made during a certain period of time is the final step to autonomous studies. Thus, the usage of blended learning, when a learner is given much autonomy, enhances responsibility for learning and fosters a new type of self-monitoring.

Research Findings

The results of the feedback questionnaire provided to Blended language learners were analysed after the completion of the course called “Autonomous Language Learning”. The learners were the representatives of four countries: Bulgaria, Lithuania, Romania and Turkey. The course was divided into units after which the learners had to evaluate themselves. The monitoring process started

from the beginning of the course as soon as the Orientation Unit was completed. The answers to the statement “The course is relevant to my needs as a learner” are represented in Fig. 1.

The graph, where 1 means the lowest and 5-the highest mark, shows that the course where blended language learning approach was applied was mostly relevant to Romanian and Bulgarian learners. 60% of Romanian respondents gave 4 to this statement and 54.5% of Bulgarian learners evaluated this course as highly relevant to their needs. Feedback questionnaire results were taken into account and the course designs as well as some activities were changed especially for Lithuanian learners. The difficulty in relation to the level is shown in Fig. 2.

The learners were introduced to different practical, social and cultural situations which helped them to know the target country as well as the target language. Fig. 3 represents the results of the question whether this course gave practical and cultural context to better understand how to behave in various social situations.

The analysis of the relationship between students’ motivation, attitude, the level of responsi-

bility and students needs and wishes was revealed ($p = .02$; $r = .183^*$). Statistically significant correlation between learners’ motivation and the sense of responsibility was found ($p = .000$; $r = .646^{**}$). Statistical significance between learning motivation (Table 1) and students’ need for autonomous studies was established with the help of ANOVA ($p = .02$; $r = 3.742$). A conclusion was drawn that students’ wishes and needs to work independently depend on their motivation, attitude and responsibility. The higher motivation, the more autonomous learning students want to have in this learning process.

While analyzing basic parameters of autonomous language learning, a number of external factors influencing students’ learning motivation were established and statistical significance between them was found.

It is interesting to note that design correlates significantly with responsibility ($p = .000$; $r = .42$) and with motivation ($p = .000$; $r = .53$). It means that learning environment influences students’ motivation and responsibility. As it could be seen from Table 1, the necessity for structure is expressed by a lot of students. Good

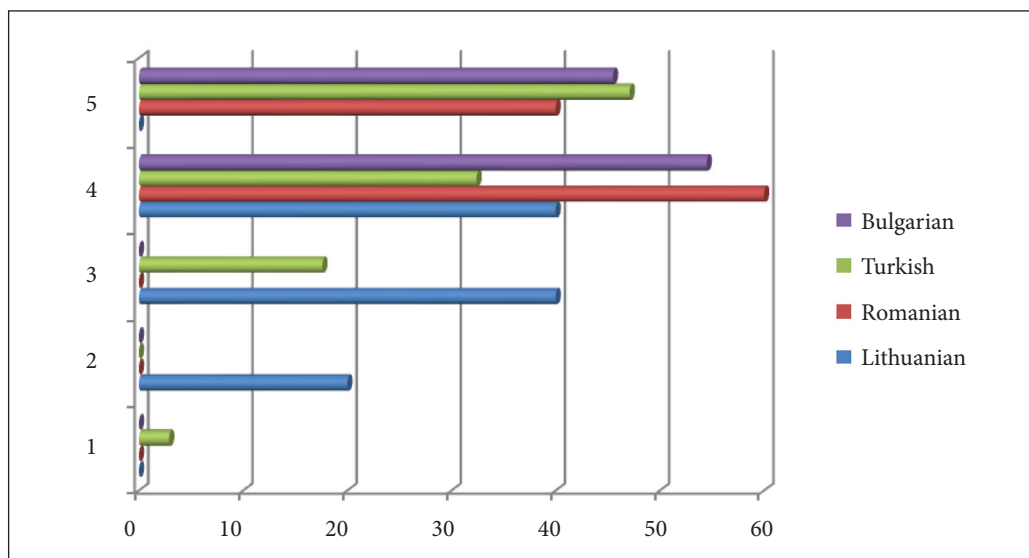


Fig. 1. The relevancy of the course to learners needs

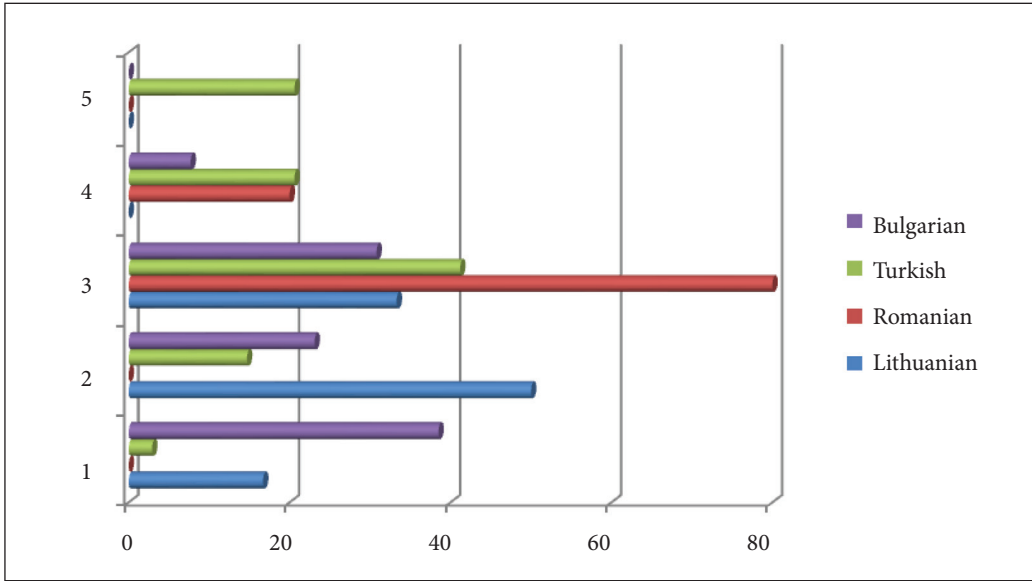


Fig. 2. Difficulty in relation to level

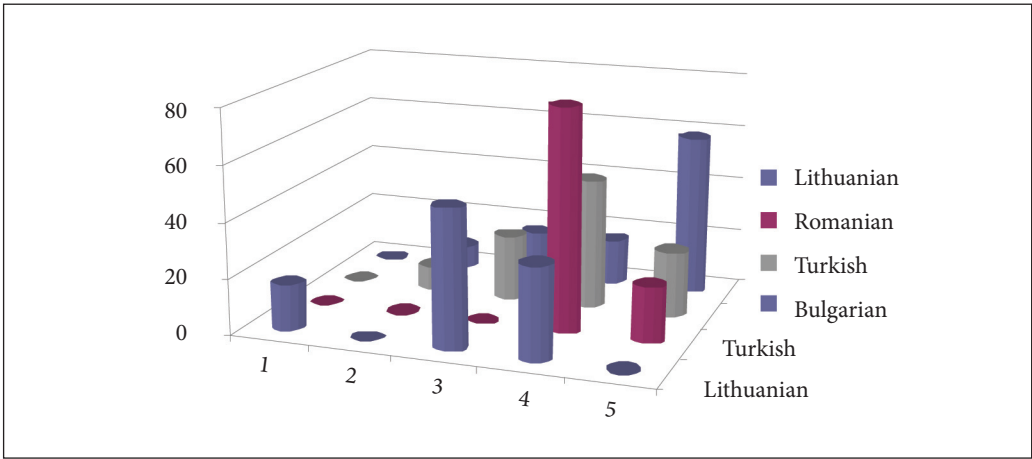


Fig. 3. Practical/social/cultural context for each situation

Table 1. Correlational subordination of external factors of autonomous language studying

	motivation	responsibility	design	structure	authority
motivation	1,000				
responsibility	,646**	1,000			
design	,529**	,422**	1,000		
structure	,308**	,196*	,218**	1,000	
authority	,167*	,132	,176*	,502**	1,000

** – correlation is significant at 0.01 level

* – correlation is significant at 0.05 level

structure of a learning process shows strong causality relations with motivation ($p = .000$; $r = 31$), learning environment ($p = .008$; $r = 22$) and authority – necessity for teacher's interference ($p = .000$; $r = 50$), a weaker correlation was revealed with responsibility ($p = .018$; $r = 20$). It means that structured learning process doesn't encourage students to take responsibility for their studies.

Conclusions

Having analysed the results of the feedback questionnaire, the following conclusions can be drawn: 1) despite being autonomous in blended language learning students need monitoring in their studies, 2) students' needs and feedback analysis should be done to foster their autonomy as well as to be aware of the success of the course, 3) the usage of blended language learning enhances students' responsibility for their studies and encourages their active participation in the learning process.

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KALBOS MOKYMOŠI PROCESO MONITORINGAS TAIKANT MIŠRŲJŲ MOKYMOŠI METODĄ

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Straipsnyje nagrinėjami tarptautinio projekto ALL (Autonominis kalbos mokymasis) rezultatai, kurie atspindi kalbos mokymosi taikant mišrųjį mokymosi metodą efektyvumą. Besimokančių asmenų poreikių analizė, grįžtamojo ryšio tyrimas bei mokymosi pasiekimų vertinimas atskleidė respondentų požiūrį į naujo metodo taikymą kalbos mokymosi procese. Kaip parodė tyrimas, dėstytojas studentams reikalingas kaip konsultantas, informacijos teikėjas ar partneris, kuris skatina juos prisiimti atsakomybę patiems vertinti ir kontroliuoti savo studijų eigą. Straipsnyje aprašomas naujas tiek dėstytojo, tiek studento vaidmuo taikant mišrųjį kalbos mokymosi metodą, kuris skatina dėstytojo bei studento dialogą ir atveria naujas perkeliamaųjų įgūdžių ugdymo galimybes.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: mišrusis mokymasis, autonomija, monitoringas.

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