

Chapter 20

Innovations in Blended–Learning: Promoting Proficiency in Reading Comprehension among Students with Dyslexia

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ABSTRACT

This research was born out of a necessity to accommodate students with learning disabilities who study English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at the Ashkelon Academic College in Israel. It was aimed at examining whether a convergence of traditional teaching and computer technology complemented by e-learning could assist students with Learning Disabilities (LD) to bypass their initial disadvantages when it came to studying English. Groups of LD students selected for study were given five regular and two guided reading tests to explore whether the use of blended learning improved the reading comprehension abilities of students in the sample group.

INTRODUCTION

At Ashkelon College, we are moving from a teacher-centered to a learner-focused system of education. New developments in learning and technology provide opportunities for creating well-designed meaningful learning environments for diverse learners including learners with disabilities. With the advent of computer based education and online learning methodologies and

technologies, providers of education are combining teaching methods to fulfill the needs of their learners. Academic institutions now increasingly make use of the internet and digital technologies to deliver instruction and training. Many instructors are encouraged to design courses in which students can benefit from blended learning, a relatively new educational practice which integrates classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka,

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2004). Transformation of learning environments in higher education settings for an increasingly electronic world is critical to ensure that the benefits are fully realized (Williams, 2002). Universities and other institutions of higher education are required to “provide for a larger and more diverse cross-section of the population, to cater for emerging patterns on educational involvement which facilitate lifelong learning and to include technology-based practices in the curriculum” (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001, p. 143)

Despite the gaining acceptance of blended learning in higher education (Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007), blended learning is often a neglected pedagogical strategy for teaching students with learning disabilities. The reasons for the lack of use may vary from teachers who are unaware of the options for using blended learning in their courses, to teachers who are familiar with this method of teaching, but might feel threatened by change and the use of new technologies. Thus far, no studies were conducted examining the blended learning experiences of students with learning disabilities, and its contribution to successful learning.

In this study, the use of blended learning emerged out of the necessity to accommodate students with learning disabilities who study English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education. We would like to share our experience in the field by discussing the practical use of blended learning with this particular group of students. For these students, frontal teaching and the use of assistive technologies (AT) were combined with e-learning in order to assist them read in English. The policy at Ashkelon College is that students with learning disabilities are entitled to a reader. This policy is advantageous during exams and while working at home. However, during the lessons which are not specifically suited to the needs of the LD students, they are unable to benefit from a reader. Instead, LD students have to cope with the reading of the text by themselves, which makes the task almost impossible. Often times they become frustrated at their lack of success and lose motivation. The purpose of the current study was to examine the

use of blended learning for teaching English to LD students, and its contribution to successful learning.

In the following sections, we will elaborate on the issue of teaching English in higher education settings, in particular in Israel. Moreover, we will present literature related to teaching English to LD students in higher education using assistive technologies, e-learning modalities, and blended learning techniques. Finally, we will share how these techniques were used to teach English to LD students and the effect these pedagogical strategies had on our students at Ashkelon Academic College.

BACKGROUND

Teaching English for Academic Purposes in Higher Education

In the world of globalization, reading academic texts in English is a basic requirement of higher education. English is important both for college or university entry and for graduation. English is a very important subject especially for students in non-English speaking countries. Thus, as part of the academic requirements in Israel, all college and university students have to master academic vocabulary and reach an advanced level of exemption in reading comprehension in order to graduate.

This exemption level is achieved either through psychometric exams or through enrollment in different levels of English courses based on their entrance level of English. Students who did not reach exemption level prior to their admission to college or university take English courses at different levels, from beginners to advanced levels, provided at the institutions of higher education so that they can meet the requirements. The aim of these courses is to assist students in reaching a proper level of text comprehension in English through the teaching of reading strategies and familiarizing students with extended academic vocabulary.

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