



## Blended learning as a resource for integrating self-access and traditional face-to-face tuition in EFL tertiary education

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This paper examines the use of blended-learning approaches to carry out self-access processes integrated within conventional face-to-face classroom tuition in EFL university tuition by actively drawing upon e-learning. The role of ICTs in resource centres is explored in relation to EFL acquisition. This contribution reports the experience undertaken at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, where a resource centre was used as a complement to traditional instructional processes for students. As well as discussing the type of learning strategies and tutoring needed for the programme, attention is paid to the use of online resources for the learners' independent-study activity, and the integration of collaborative tools (e.g. e-mail, chats, distribution lists, forums or videoconferencing) to construct interaction among self-students and counsellors, and promote autonomy. The discussion of results considers the reluctance of traditional institutions to implement blended-learning programmes and the positive effects of curricular adaptations based on blended learning approaches.

**Keywords** blended learning; ICTs; distant education; self-access; EFL; tertiary education; traditional institutions

### 1. Introduction

Contrary to face-to-face tuition involving the full-time presence of a teacher guiding and monitoring students' learning activity in the classroom, *self-access* approaches to language-learning entail students autonomous use of materials and resources to develop independent-learning processes [1, 2, 3]. On the other hand, *blended learning* has come to be understood as a combination of conventional-classroom instruction and e-learning [4, 5]. Blended learning processes are thus articulated by combining online learning and traditional learning approaches in various degrees.

This contribution explores the potential of blended-learning approaches to implement self-access learning processes integrated within conventional face-to-face classroom tuition in English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) university tuition by using e-learning resources. This paper reports the experience undertaken at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain), where a resource centre has started to be used as a complement to traditional instructional processes for EFL students in an attempt to incorporate self-study strategies into conventional face-to-face tuition by actively drawing upon e-learning tools.

The broader educational context triggering this experience may be accounted for by considering the greater implication of traditional institutions such as universities in distant education programmes resulting from the impact of ICTs on education and, chiefly, individuals' increasing demand to have access to learning programmes combining on-site tuition with distant learning developed through the new technologies.

### 2. An experience incorporating self-access into EFL face-to-face tertiary education through blended learning

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1 This paper presents an experience aiming to integrate students' self-access activity within the regular  
2 face-to-face full-time teaching in EFL through the establishment of a blended-learning curricular  
3 organisation of tuition of EFL courses within the B.A. degree in English Studies. By and large, the  
4 overall objective of the experience was to set up a blended learning approach for EFL tuition where  
5 students' e-learning activity could be carried out following a self-access approach. Bearing in mind other  
6 successful attempts to incorporate e-learning into self-study practices for language learners [6], our  
7 purpose was thus to integrate undergraduates' self-access utilization of online learning within the overall  
8 conventional face-to-face instruction approach guiding tuition in EFL courses.

9 The methodology employed to implement the blended learning framework consisted of the following  
10 stages:

- 11 ✓ selecting and clearly defining the role of different ICTs applications in the resource centre of the  
12 Modern Languages Department so that students' e-learning activity could be carried out;
- 13 ✓ choosing a self-access method for students to use e-learning resources;
- 14 ✓ delineating the role of self-access and e-learning in the syllabus of EFL courses.

15 The results of the experience described here are accordingly related to these three methodological steps  
16 in a direct way. The experience was developed over a four-year period, at the end of which period EFL  
17 tuition was thoroughly reorganised due to broader changes affecting the B.A. in English Studies on the  
18 whole.

### 19 20 **3. Results**

#### 21 22 3.1 The role of ICTs in the resource centre

23  
24 The resource centre was the space chosen for EFL students to carry out their self-access activity through  
25 the utilization of e-learning tools of various kinds. The resource centre had been originally envisaged as a  
26 multimedia language laboratory equipped with the latest technological advances for language learners,  
27 including satellite TV, video and audio, DVD and computer facilities with individual access to the  
28 Internet, all of which applications could be employed by users from inside individual booths.

29 In addition to a conversation area for learners to practise speaking skills with their counsellors and  
30 further Department personnel collaborating in the tuition tasks of EFL courses, storage of different types  
31 of printed material (e.g. textbooks, dictionaries, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, etc.) allowed using the  
32 multimedia language laboratory as a self-access centre. In order to run and manage the newly-established  
33 self-access space, previous work developed by the British Council on resource centres' management was  
34 considered and adopted [7, 8, 9, 10]. As well as performing materials' maintenance and installation  
35 duties, the laboratory technician had an important hosting role for students. Moreover, various EFL staff  
36 actively collaborated in the experience performing counselling and speaking-practice functions.

37 Taking into account the possibilities of ICTs for language learning, a selection of online resources and  
38 collaborative tools was made available to students from every booth in the resource centre. Such  
39 application and their pedagogic use was as follows:

- 40 ✓ *Search engines.* Major search engines (e.g. google.com; altavista.com; yahoo.com; lycos.com;  
41 etc.) were made available from the PC screen of every cabin in the multimedia language  
42 laboratory. Search engines were considered to be highly useful for learners to have instant  
43 access to any EFL information.
- 44 ✓ *Websites.* A selection of websites specially created for EFL learners was incorporated onto the  
45 screen of every single post in the resource centre so that students could access such online  
46 resources simply by clicking on the corresponding icon. As we examine somewhere else [11,  
47 12], such websites were arranged in accordance with a number of fundamental parameters  
48 within EFL learning and acquisition processes.
- 49 ✓ *E-mail.* Students were provided with a personal e-mail address to facilitate interaction with their  
50 counsellors. For although tutorial sessions between learners and counsellors regularly took place  
51 on a face-to-face basis, students were given the chance of using e-mail so as to interact with  
52

1 their tutors. Furthermore, e-mail was likewise used to enable learners to interact with other EFL  
2 learners not only from within their course but also around the world, and thus be able to practise  
3 writing skills.

- 4 ✓ *Chat*. A special chat was activated once a week to allow students within the group to practise  
5 writing with other EFL classmates. Chats were also used in EFL websites including this  
6 application, which gave learners the opportunity to interact with other EFL students throughout  
7 the world. In particular, websites with voiced chatrooms were highly profitable for learners, for  
8 they let them practise speaking with other students.
- 9 ✓ *Distribution list*. An internal distribution list was activated within every group of students.  
10 Students received different kinds of announcements in their e-mail via this distribution list, for  
11 instance, pieces of advice, useful EFL websites, common mistakes, assignments, deadlines, and  
12 so on.
- 13 ✓ *Newsgroup*. In addition to the chat and the distribution list, an internal newsgroup was activated  
14 for each EFL class group. The newsgroup was employed so that students could post written  
15 assignments, doubts or comments, which either teachers or other colleagues could answer back  
16 by posting back the corresponding corrections or comments in return.
- 17 ✓ *Videoconference*. Videoconference sessions took place on a regular basis to create oral  
18 interaction between Spanish learners of EFL and other EFL students belonging to institutions  
19 with which our home university held different exchange agreements (e.g. Erasmus). Such  
20 session were especially profitable when interaction took place between Spanish students of  
21 English and English-speaking learners of Spanish as a foreign language in Britain or Spanish as  
22 a second language in the USA.

### 23 24 25 3.2 Self-access approach guiding the use of e-learning resources by students

26 The purpose of the experience described here was to set up a blended learning platform for the teaching  
27 and learning practice of EFL courses of the B.A. degree in English Studies where e-learning tools could  
28 be used by students following a self-study approach. One major underlying assumption in the  
29 programme was the convenience of enabling students to use online resources to compensate for  
30 individual weaknesses or deficient areas within the overall objectives of EFL courses. Independent-study  
31 work in the resource centre utilizing e-learning tools would thus give learners a unique opportunity to  
32 define their learning process in EFL on the basis of their personal needs within the overall face-to-face  
33 framework guaranteeing every student's accomplishment of some minimal learning objectives and  
34 requirements in EFL courses.

35 The self-access approach selected for students' to develop their autonomous-learning activity in the  
36 resource centre was based on the methodological work undertaken at the CRAPEL (Centre de  
37 Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues [Centre for Research and Pedagogic  
38 Applications in Modern Languages]) by various authors [13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18]. Following this  
39 approach, self-access is understood as a form of autonomous learning allowing self-students to define  
40 their language-learning process.

41 Although students will be in control of their learning process at all times, in an attempt to outline such  
42 'made-to-measure' learning programmes they count on the supervising action of a counsellor helping  
43 them to carry out their self-access activity in language learning by activating appropriate learning  
44 strategies so that tutoring becomes a fundamental part of self-study programmes. Students' independent  
45 study will thus be monitored throughout a series of regular counselling sessions helping them define a  
46 number of fundamental factors for their learning activity. Such major learning parameters are as follows:

- 47 ✓ establishing personal learning objectives and needs;
  - 48 ✓ selecting appropriate materials and resources;
  - 49 ✓ choosing adequate working procedures including learning strategies and techniques;
  - 50 ✓ defining one's self-study programme in terms of not only the duration of the programme as a  
51 whole but also the regularity of self-access sessions in the resource centre;
- 52

1 ✓ developing self-assessment techniques.

2 Given that self-students happen to have their self-access activity tutored by a counsellor, such essential  
3 variables for the learning process may be renegotiated and modified on the basis of the learner's  
4 evolution and accomplishment of initial goals. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that, as the  
5 blended learning programme was based on an autonomous use of e-learning resources available in the  
6 resource centre, counselling sessions played a key role in helping learners select and employ appropriate  
7 materials and ICTs applications suiting their personal needs.  
8

### 9 3.3 E-learning and self-access in the syllabus of EFL courses: institutionalising blended 10 learning 11

12 The goal of the experience presented here was to set up a blended-learning programme guiding the  
13 teaching and learning practice of EFL courses in the B.A. degree in English over a four-year period. This  
14 blended-learning approach would accordingly integrate undergraduates' self-access work and their use of  
15 online resources into the conventional tuition practices of EFL subjects in the Department. In order to  
16 implement this programmes, EFL practitioners participating in the project agreed to commit themselves  
17 to converting self-access sessions in the resource centre into a fixed component of the syllabus of their  
18 EFL courses. E-learning lectures in the resource centre were no longer random sessions organised by  
19 teachers, but rather a regular part of the syllabus.

20 E-learning time spent by students in the self-access centre was thus agreed to become as much as one  
21 third of the total tuition time in course curricula, the two remaining thirds being taught to EFL groups as  
22 a whole in a 'regular' face-to-face way. Expenditure of such time in the self-access centre undertaking e-  
23 learning work plus attendance at scheduled counselling sessions on a regular basis, were essential  
24 prerequisites for students to be entitled to take the final paper. Students were thus required to hand in  
25 attendance sheets reporting their autonomous work in the resource centre.  
26

## 27 4. Discussion 28

29 As stated above, the experience reported here was developed over a four-year period prior to a  
30 restructuring of the B.A. curriculum. A number of surveys distributed among EFL practitioners involved  
31 in the experience and students proved the positive results of this project. Considering EFL staff, the  
32 implementation of the blended learning programme served as a good training for EFL teachers as far the  
33 possibilities of introducing ICTs in language learning were concerned. In addition, at the end of the  
34 experience, EFL practitioners claimed to have become more aware of the importance of teaching  
35 students how to learn by themselves. Performing counselling roles was a most enriching task in most of  
36 the teachers' view.

37 On the other hand, students likewise acknowledged the beneficial effects of self-directed learning as a  
38 complement for conventional learning processes. As it is, they greatly appreciated the opportunity which  
39 they were given to contribute actively to organising and monitoring their own learning process.  
40 Furthermore, they admitted becoming fully aware of the potential of online tools for language learning,  
41 and the possibilities of e-learning tools to develop self-access approaches when learning EFL.

42 At any rate, the most significant hindrance in the implementation of the programme was the reluctance  
43 of some EFL practitioners not participating in the project to have the programme officially imposed in  
44 the B.A. curriculum, for this would imply surrendering part of the 'authority' traditionally granted to  
45 teachers over students in directing learning processes in the classroom. This attitude was interpreted as  
46 resulting from the strong impact of traditional approaches to language learning in tertiary education.

47 On the contrary, blended learning proved to be remarkably beneficial to perform diverse curricular  
48 adaptations on students with special learning needs. Therefore, students feeling unable to attend on-site  
49 tuition for various reasons took full advantage of the possibilities of undertaking self-access use of online  
50 resources. The same applied to learners with outstanding deficiencies in EFL which caused them to have  
51 significant difficulty in achieving the expected level of the class as a whole. Such students were given the  
52 option of undertaking extensive practice in the resource centre, which helped them boost their language

1 level in a significant way. For the same reason, students above the average standard of a class and  
2 accordingly feeling that they were not learning as much as they could, were able to benefit from  
3 independent-learning sessions in the resource centre by drawing upon ICTs to increase and enhance their  
4 level without forcing their classmates to work at an exceedingly fast pace. Teachers expressed their  
5 satisfaction of acting as counsellors activating such curricular adaptations by means of e-learning tools  
6 employed from a self-study perspective.  
7

## 8 **5. Conclusion**

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10 Considering the positive results of the experience dealing with blended learning in EFL at university,  
11 case studies like this may be considered as a model for the implementation of similar programmes in  
12 tertiary education. Blended learning approaches like this will no doubt be highly appreciated as a model  
13 for the forthcoming introduction of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) in European  
14 universities in the near future, which will cause institutions to reduce face-to-face tuition time and ponder  
15 learners' independent-study time. An adequate integration of autonomous use of online resources within  
16 on-site tuition may be predicted to have a most positive effect in this challenging context for universities.  
17 The experience may also be inspiring for traditional institutions aiming to develop language-learning  
18 processes combining the possibilities of 'traditional' face-to-face tuition and distant-education  
19 approaches.  
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