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BLENDED LEARNING AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN R.N. MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT: Blended learning is a combination of online integration and face-to-face learning that complement one another to enhance and support learning. It is widely used across disciplines and in the EFL classroom as well. This paper aims to outline the significance of using a blended learning approach as a supplement to the face to face learning in English language teaching and to understand the perception, the attitudes, and the challenges of the EFL teachers from tertiary education in Republic of Macedonia regarding blended learning in English language teaching. The paper looks at the reasons for applying multimedia technology to English language teaching, the possibility of enhancement of ELT through technology, the benefits of incorporating technology in the language learning and teaching process, and presents the findings of an empirical research conducted in nine universities from R.N. Macedonia conducted in 2019. The empirical research relies on the descriptive method and it was conducted through an online survey consisting of a 22-question questionnaire answered by twenty EFL teachers from tertiary education. The questionnaire was designed in such a manner to be able to collect data to answer the research questions regarding the use of the blended learning approach in the EFL classroom. The findings suggest that the blended learning model is used in the EFL classroom in tertiary education in R.N. Macedonia. However, several challenges need to be addressed in order to fully and systematically implement the model and observe the opportunities it offers.

KEYWORDS: *blended learning, EFL teachers, tertiary education, multimedia technology, English language learning*

INTRODUCTION

The technological advancement over the last two decades has changed the working procedures and the dynamics across industries and has influenced the way individuals function, work, and even live. When it comes to the learning and teaching of the English language, EFL teachers have been for a long time relying on technology in the EFL classroom like the TV, the cassette and CD players, the computers, the Internet and the various options they offer. As a result, Information Technology has offered a possibility and has imposed a need for exploration of new teaching models influenced by the quick development of IT. Thus, information technology has become an important factor in English language teaching and learning. It is therefore important for EFL teachers to be up-to-date with the IT developments and be able to use these new and evolving technologies efficiently (Al-Masri 2012). The world we live in today has an unprecedented number of opportunities to communicate in a compelling and authentic way. A lot of fascinating options for enhancing teaching using technology are available for English teachers. This can be challenging for the teachers when trying to choose which tools, resources, websites are ideal for a particular lesson or session. These opportunities have become a norm in our daily lives and entail social media, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence.

The implementation of different teaching methods has been a result of the increasing number of English learners in order to improve effectiveness in the process of teaching and learning. Technology has greatly transformed the ways of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Globalization has also greatly influenced education and culture. Technology assists in making the teaching of English as a foreign language more interesting as it gets students involved

taking into consideration their interests. Moreover, this has increased the use of English by more speakers as it spreads throughout the world (T.Sylvie 2011, Al-Masri 2012, Hyland 2015).

The research in this paper involves Macedonian universities and the way smart technologies and the blended learning classroom are being used by EFL teachers into their teaching practice in tertiary education.

The blended learning is not a privilege of the 21st century. Namely, the blended learning history reaches far back in 1840, when the first education distance course is launched by Sir Isaac Pitman that was centered on short-hand. The students received shorthand texts from Pitman and were required to send them back for corrections and grading. This was a time when mobile devices and computers were yet to be invented but still, an integral part of the process was effective assessment and feedback (Hyland 2015).

Mainframe Computer-based training followed in the 1960s and '70s that enabled training deployment to numerous workers without depending on face-to-face instructions and printed materials. Access to information was granted to each terminal with proper login details. A good example was Plato, developed in 1963 by the University of Illinois and Control Data.

To support TV training, TV-based technology was incorporated for training in the 1970s and '80s. There was no longer a need for the instructor's physical presence as a TV could be used for relaying information. Questions and concerns, and answers in return, were sent by email. An example of satellite-based training took place at Stanford University in the 1970s and 80s where the TV network was used to assist professors to hold classes in multiple classrooms at once (Tobolka 2002).

The 1980s and '90s saw the rise of Learning Management Systems and CD-ROM training. The advancement in technology influenced the change in blending applications and strategies where CD-ROM was used to deliver sound and video features for information provision. Learning Management Systems were used to track the progress of the learner by monitoring course completion, user performance, and enrollment information.

The first web-based instruction generation began in 1998 where the function of the computer had evolved to be used by the masses. There was an immersion in sound, graphics, and video while browsers provided more access to the internet by increasing the connection speeds. Currently, there is a rapid change in technology, increasing the potential benefits blended learning has to offer for all kinds of students.

The currently available wide tech variety such as online tutorials and webinars help to initiate the union between technology-based learning and face-to-face interactions. New technology has risen over the many years but not everything remained. This may be result of the growing concerns over security and the wearing out of some innovations. Those that have stood the test of time possess a solid teaching practice. Blended learning trend is reflected by course material and resources of teachers as they combine technology with the more perceived traditional mode of teaching. For example, the Modern Language Centre in London King's College combines online lessons with face-to-face-teaching. Blended learning is a more preferred classroom interaction model due to its combination of face-to-face and online learning. It also accommodates the learning style of each student to reach the highest level of absorbance (Nomass 2013, Ghada 2014).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical research presented in this paper relies on the descriptive method. It was carried out in the period from August 2018 to May 2019. An online survey was conducted at the beginning of 2019 to suggest answers to the following research question: Do EFL teachers in tertiary education in Republic of North Macedonia rely on the blended learning approach; Several supporting research questions were developed as well: How is the blended learning model used at Macedonian universities; To what extent EFL teachers in tertiary education are familiar with the new technologies in teaching; how often and in what ways do they use them; What are the problems they face in the use of modern technologies in the EFL classroom; In order to propose answers to these questions a questionnaire consisting of 22 mainly close-ended questions was designed and prepared for distribution to the EFL teachers in tertiary education in the N. Macedonia through Google Forms. The questions were divided in two sets: a demographic set of four questions and thematic set consisting of 18 questions. Twenty EFL teachers from seven state and two private universities in N. Macedonia were surveyed.

The gathered data were quantitatively presented and analyzed through pies and charts automatically generated by Google Form. The results were later discussed in relation to the research questions and conclusions were drawn.

RESULTS

The majority of the respondents were female (85%) between 31-40 years of age (45%) and with a working experience of more than 15 years (45%). Regarding the subjects they teach, a variety of courses were indicated such as Modern English Language, Academic Writing in English, Business English etc.

► As far as the thematic section is concerned, all respondents answered that they are familiar with the CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) at least to a certain degree. Eighty percent of the respondents answered that they use online materials in the EFL classroom. Only ten percent of the respondents answered that they not use a computer when they teach. Twenty – five percent of the respondents regularly use an interactive white board in the EFL classroom, 40% use it occasionally, 15% do not use interactive white boards because they do not have one at their disposal, and the remaining 20% have never used one at all. Five percent of the respondents answered that they did not use Power Point or any other type of presentation programs in the EFL classroom. Fifty percent use Power Point presentations regularly and 45% occasionally. All respondents use at least occasionally some types of filmed materials such as films and videos. When asked whether an open-source platform such as Moodle, Blackboard, Google Classroom, etc. was used at the university they taught most of the

respondents or 50% stated that they did not use open-source platforms at their university (Figure 1). Forty percent of the respondents reported using the Open Access Moodle platform, while 10% said they used the Google Classroom.

Moodle is a free educational tool for e-learning whose name comes from the acronym Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment and was created by Martin Dougiamas (Nishina 2009). According to the latest findings, the Moodle platform today has about 100 million registered users from around 234 countries and is available in over 100 languages (Knežević 2017). The diversity offered by the Moodle platform in studying English allows for branching into the various spheres of everyday life, including English in the industry, in business, etc. (Stanford, 2019), as well as the social nature of learning, integration of the curriculum, alternative directions of knowledge, etc. In that direction, Ward (2005) noted that Moodle's activities, such as chat, forum, news, and workshops, accelerate the communicative and targeted learning of language by students.

Fig 1.

Open-source content management system in tertiary education

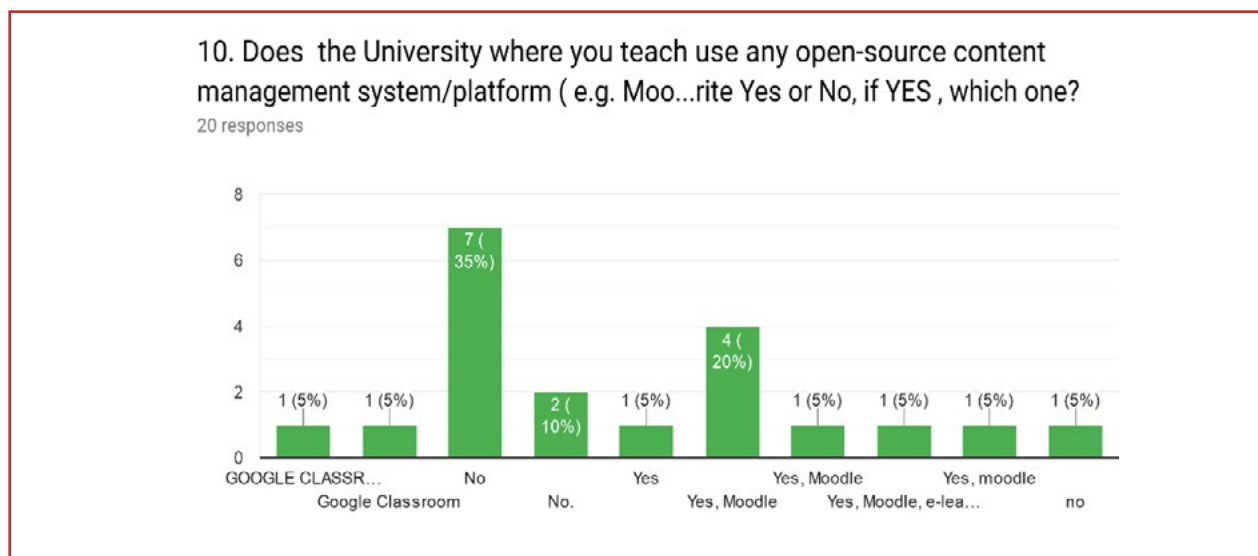


Fig. 2.

Type of materials uploaded to the open-source learning platform

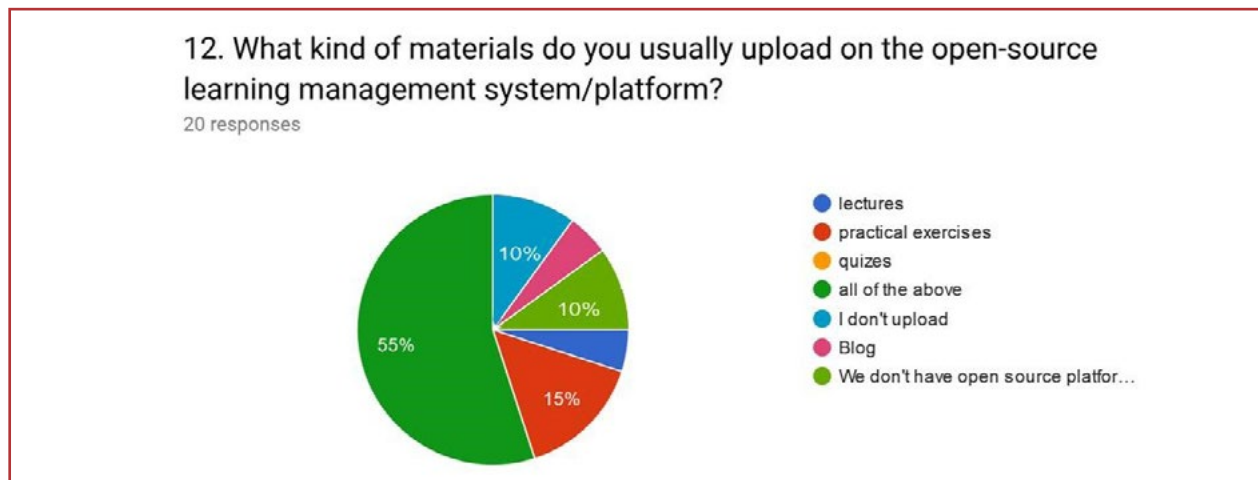
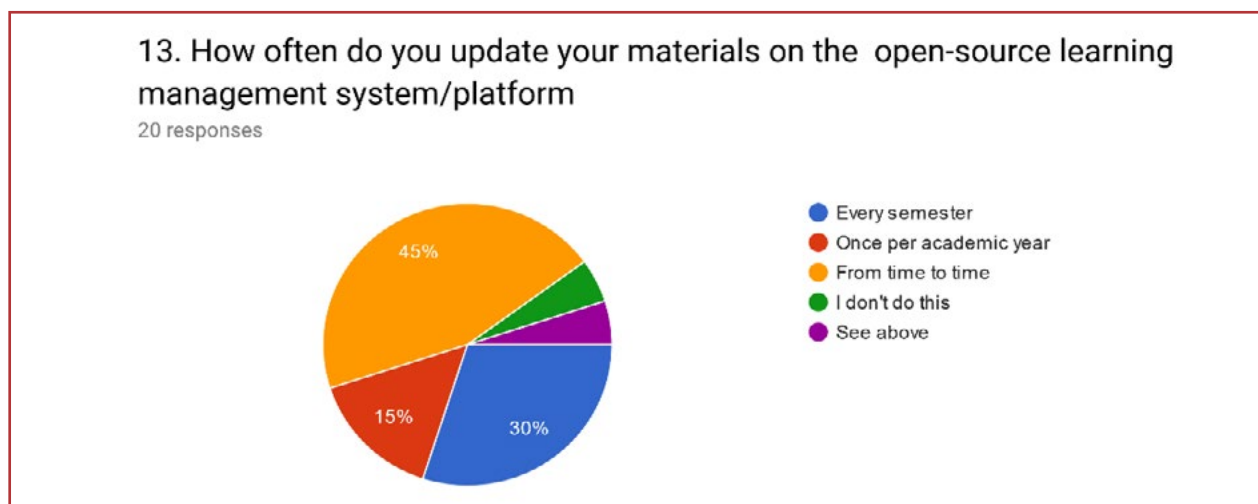


Fig. 3.

Update frequency of open-source platform materials

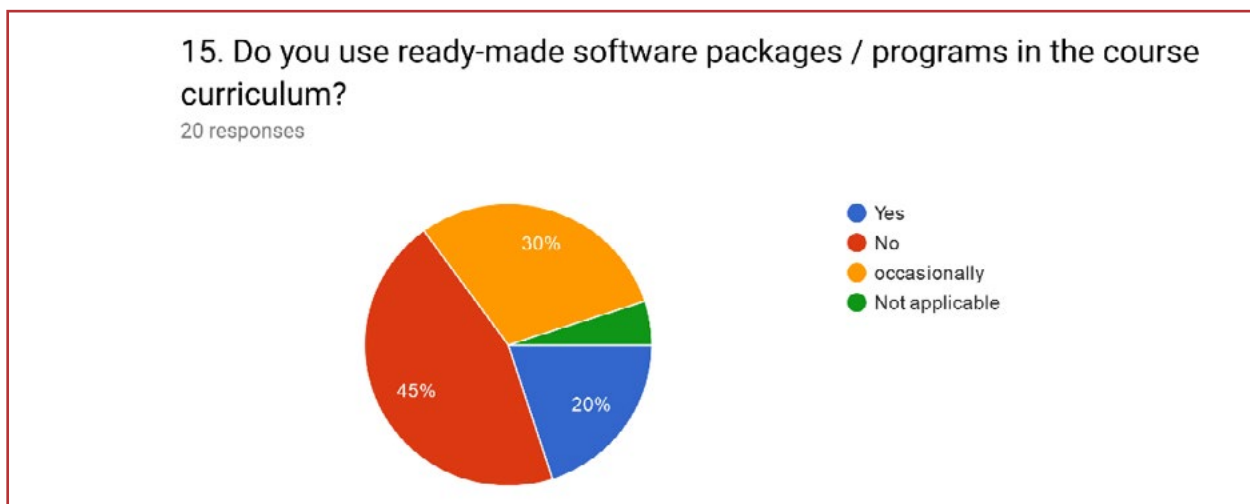


Working with Moodle is quite simple and does not require extensive nor specific IT knowledge, and offers great opportunities for both teachers and students. Thus, Moodle has become one of the most widely accepted e-learning platforms. With Moodle, teachers and students can use various functions: uploading and downloading reading materials, create and do online quizzes, automatic registration of activities, sending and receiving messages, blogging, etc. (Nishina 2009).

When asked what kind of materials they upload on the open-source learning

management system (Figure 2), 55% of the respondents stated that they were uploading various types of materials such as lectures, exercises, quizzes, and use the blog options.

Fifteen percent of the respondents said that they uploaded only practical exercises, 5% upload only lectures, and 5% use the blog option only. This question is a continuation of the previous one and the respondents gave quite expected answers in our case. In Figure 3 the respondents' answers are presented regarding the frequency of updating the uploaded

Fig. 4.*Ready-made software packages*

materials. The pie chart shows that 45% of the respondents said that they updated the materials from time to time, 30% reported that they renew the materials once in the semester, while 15% do it once during the academic year. Five percent said they did not update the materials, while the remaining 5% reported that it depended on the needs.

In the context of the above practices, even when there is an effective ready-made teaching material, it can relatively quickly become obsolete, so it is indispensable to be updated or even replaced with newer or renewed ones (Dabić, 2015; Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2015; Knežević, 2017).

- When asked if they used ready-made software packages or computer programs in course curriculum, most of the respondents, or 45% said they did not use software packages or computer programs (Figure 4).

Software packages have been proved to be excellent tools for enhancing listening skills and pronunciation in students (Goodwin, 2001). On the other hand, software packages, although tailored for studying English, do not fully satisfy

the EFL classroom needs, however they greatly complement face-to-face activities and instructor's input as it is the case with translation tools, voice recognition, software grammar and spell check similar (Sokolik, 2001) and are indispensable part of the blended learning approach in language teaching and learning.

- When it comes to the use of social networks in the EFL classroom, the results are presented in Figure 5 below. On one hand, we have a high percentage of 55% who use social networks in the EFL classroom at least occasionally. On the other hand, 40% of the respondents stated that they do not use them at all. Similar results were obtained in research conducted at the University of Belgrade (40% use social networks) and the University of Podgorica (50% use social networks) (Knežević, 2017).

In contrast, only 7% of teachers used social networks in universities in the United States (Hartshorne et al., 2010), but the rates of using blogs, wikis, etc is very high. However, some researchers, such as Laakkonen (2011), make clear that social networks are the most popular way of communicating among young people,

Fig. 5.

Information about the social networks used in English Language Teaching

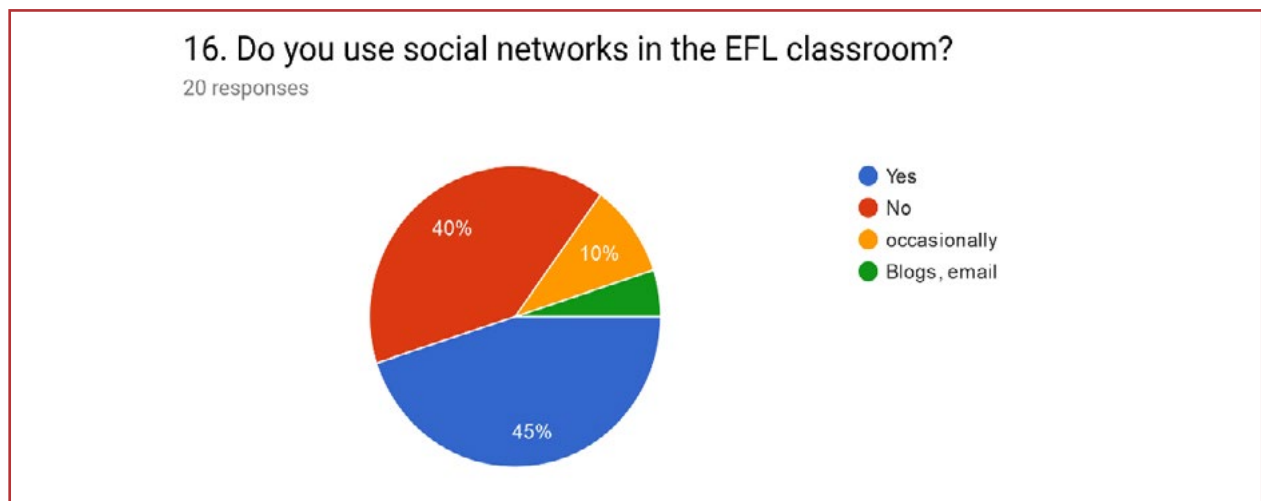
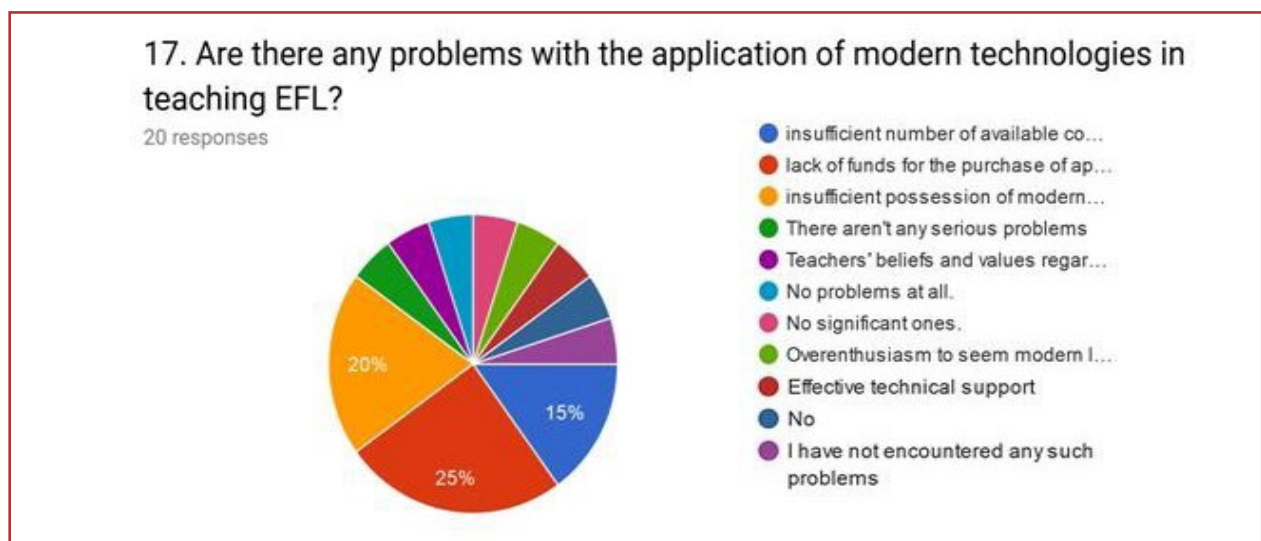


Fig. 6.

Problems with the application of modern technologies used in English Language Teaching



enabling students to network, interact, exchange links, materials, multimedia and so on.

- When asked whether there are some problems in the application of modern technologies in the study of the English language, we have quite a wide variety of responses by the surveyed teachers, although many of them are of subjective character or have the same essence just described in other words. The results shown in

Figure 6 show a range of responses. Twenty-five percent of the surveyed teachers points out that the use of modern English language teaching tools lacks financial resources that would enable continued procurement and use of new technologies.

Twenty percent of the surveyed teachers indicated a lack of modern tools in their institutions such as computers, tablets, androids, as well as trainings for students and teachers for their use; 15% of

the surveyed teachers reported that there was insufficient access to computers at their faculties. Similar findings can be found in the research of Kukulska-Hulme et al (2015), but also in the work of Tweed (2013) where this connection between teachers, new technologies and classroom equipment in some parts of US universities is pointed out as a problem that continuously exists and needs to be solved. Some of the problems that our universities are confronted with on the basis of the research in this paper can also be correlated with individual cases in the UK (Gilbert, 2013).

However, 40% of the surveyed teachers answered that there were no problems at their faculties with regards to the use of modern technologies in the study of the English language. These are encouraging data that correspond to developed Western European countries (Hegelheimer and Lee, 2013; Motteram, 2013). However, 5% of the respondents indicate an absence of sufficient effective technical support when applying modern techniques and tools in the study of the English language.

DISCUSSION

The gathered data enabled us to provide answers to the research questions we suggested in regards to the blended learning approach in the EFL language. The objective of this research was to examine if EFL teachers in tertiary education in Republic of North Macedonia rely on the blended learning approach. From the findings we can conclude that the majority of the surveyed teachers in tertiary education do implement the blended learning approach in the EFL classroom. The majority of the respondents are familiar with the Computer Assisted Language Learning; use online materials and a computer in the EFL classroom, use an interactive white board, presentation

programs and different types of filmed materials such as films and videos. This also suggests that EFL teachers in tertiary education are familiar with the new technologies in teaching and provides an answer to the second supporting question. However, as far as the first supporting research question is concerned, which is in regards to how the blended learning model is used at Macedonian universities, we can say that the use of the blended learning model is limited and should be advanced due to the fact that half of the respondents do not use an open-source platform such as Moodle, Blackboard or Google Classroom because the university where they teach does not offer one. An open-source platform is an indispensable part of the blended learning approach because it provides a systematic, organized, and meaningful way of using the blended learning approach effectively and continuously. An open-source platform provides efficient means and tools for blended learning, and support for both teachers, and students. The ones who do use one, mostly rely on Moodle which is one of the most widely used open-source platforms in education. Still, the opportunities used by these platforms should be more extensively and meaningfully implemented and integrated in the EFL classroom, the content regularly updated and renewed, and all available tools especially the interactive ones should be further explored and offered to students. In regards to the last supporting research question i.e. what problems the EFL teachers face in the use of modern technologies in the EFL classroom, we can conclude that teachers need more IT equipment; more trainings on how to use that technology for both them, and the students; and more IT support with specialized and available IT staff. All these are a precondition for the implementation of the blended learning model, enjoying the benefits it offers, and its contribution to the overall advancement of the tertiary education.

CONCLUSION

The use of new technologies in the study of the English language offers a greater number of benefits. The application of new technologies greatly increases the creativity of teachers; it does not only raise the quality of English language learning that is functionally related to the modernity offered by new tools and modern software in the presentation of the material, but also new technologies create a sense of additional mobilisation of each student. Thus, modern technology and the blended learning approach serve as an additional motivator and stimulator not only for students, but also for teachers who see the challenge in adopting modern tools and technology related approaches.

With the application of these modern tools, teachers have the opportunity to apply and implement learning methodologies that have proved to be very successful in studying English. We would like to stress that technology in language learning is turning English classrooms into an environment where sharing, debating, creating, and forming opinions is nurtured. The EFL classroom is more easily and more efficiently turned into a space which is much more creative and participatory (Thouësny and Bradley, 2011). Learning is more effective with virtual whiteboards, where students are a lot more involved. Online exercises and interactive multimedia content are motivating for them. This is in the context of Ahmadi's findings (2018), who stressed that computer technology can be considered as an integral part of a learning activity.

The application of new technologies in the study of the English language increases the effectiveness and interaction of the students. Students are interested in technology which is confirmed in the research by Baytak et al. (2011). Thus,

interactive learning with new technologies increases their motivation, social interactions, and engagement. In the context of the progress of English language teaching with the use of new technologies, Eady and Lockyer (2013) claim that technology has always been an important part of the teaching profession that can facilitate the students learning, by scoring a high degree of "integration".

Since modern technology is part of our everyday life, it is time to re-examine the idea of integrating technology in English language teaching and putting it in an even more important role in the teaching process.

Based on the finding presented in this paper, which surveyed twenty EFL teachers who teach various English language related courses in nine universities in N. Macedonia, the blended learning model is not unknown to the EFL teachers in tertiary education in N. Macedonia. It has been implemented in at least half of the surveyed higher education institutions at least in the English language departments. However, half of the surveyed EFL teachers indicated that their universities do not offer an open-learning platform to their faculty and students. This is a great setback and makes the use of the blended learning model limited, occasional and not systematic, which impedes the positive influence it can have on EFL learning and teaching, and on the quality education the institution offers in general. Moreover, EFL teachers reported that they need more modern technology at their disposal made available by the universities, more training, and more IT support. In order for the blended learning model to be successfully implemented, these aspects should be promptly and systematically addressed by the universities in order to be able to really enjoy the opportunities and fruits of the blended learning model.

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