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UNDERSTANDING, SETTING UP AND EVALUATING A BLENDED LANGUAGE COURSE: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

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1. Introduction

Blended learning has become increasingly frequent at the university in the past 20 years in higher education, and language learning is no exception (Nissen, 2014: §2). Literature concerning blended language learning is now extensive (see for example Neumeier, 2005, Nicolson *et al.*, 2011, Farr & Murray, 2016, McCarthy, 2016) and provides for a wide range of analyses. Definitions of blended learning often include “a mix of face-to-face and distance learning, with both elements being an important part of the whole” (Sharma & Westbrook, 2016: 320), as well as e-learning. It is also often highlighted that blending a course considerably complexifies the learning and teaching processes (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004: 96, Nissen, 2019: 14-17). Blended language learning is specific in that because language is both the objective and the means of teaching and learning, language blended courses are often characterized by active participants, strong interactions, a great diversity of resources and is often set in the tradition of “learning to learn” (Nissen, 2019: 12).

The present contribution consists in shedding a new light on blended learning thanks to a systemic approach. We argue this approach is particularly appropriate to understand complex research objects such as blended language learning training courses. We aim to demonstrate that it was instrumental in all the steps involved in an action-research, in setting up and evaluating an English training course at the University of Lille (France) for undergraduate musicology students¹.

With this aim in view, we first define what is here called a systemic approach. Next, we present the way this approach was used to analyse the learning environment in which the new training course was to take place. We then describe the new blended training course which was designed based on the results of the needs analysis. To finish, we evaluate the blended system and discuss to what extent the systemic approach was relevant to understand this aspect of the training course.

2. Definition of the blended language training course with a systemic approach

Setting up and evaluating a training course is no easy task and despite scientific progress, teachers are still left struggling with an intimidating number of questions. How should the learning context be analysed? How can working conditions, competing views – of learners, teachers, supervisors, administrative staff – on objectives, contents, learning and teaching methods be all taken into account? What should the objectives of the course be? How can learner motivation and autonomy be both encouraged? And most importantly, how can all these various elements be articulated? In view of how complex analysing a learning environment and setting up a course is, one of the main criteria for the selection of the

¹ In France, studying a second language is compulsory in most higher education programmes. LANSOD stands for “LANguage for Students of Other Disciplines” and refers to language classes destined to students whose major is not languages, but other disciplines such as medicine, chemistry, etc. 90% of students who have language classes in higher education take LANSOD courses (Causa & Derivry-Plard, 2013).

theoretical framework in which the action-research was to be grounded was that it should take complexity into account.

Systemic theories are closed to complexity theories such as those developed by Edgar Morin (1990) and Jean-Louis Le Moigne (2012). They are regularly adopted in studies of language learning and acquisition (Bertin, Gravé & Narcy-Combes, 2010, De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008, Rivens Mompean, 2013, Waninge, De Bot & Dörnyei, 2014). Schematically, systemics invites us to view training courses as systems; they are made up of elements which interact with one another to form a whole. Changing one element in the system will impact the whole system. Here is one example:

The components of the system continually interact and are mutually dependent. Illustration: a change in the curriculum entails pedagogic adjustments in terms of contents, methods and modes of teaching/learning. The other components are affected by these changes. (Bertin *et al.*, 2010: 5)

Likewise, choosing to adopt a blended format will necessarily impact learners, teachers, contents and the learning and teaching processes.

Thus, the systemic approach first provides us with an ontological characterization of blended learning training courses. Let us now have a look at how this approach guided the analysis of the learning environment in which a new training course was to be set up.

3. Analysis of the learning environment

3.1. Design of a model of learning environment

To structure the analysis of the learning environment, we first modeled a generic learning environment, as represented in Figure 1 below. Modelling is a common tool in systemic approaches (Rosnay, 1975: 121). In our case, it provides for a global understanding of a complex system and it helps bring the relationships between the elements of a system to light (Durand, 2013: Chapter 3, §36-37).

As it is impossible to identify all the elements and processes involved in a learning environment, we selected the elements to appear on the model with the concept of “simplicity” in mind. According to Berthoz (2018), it is “simplifying principles” which “enable the brain to prepare an action and plan for the consequences of it”, “despite the complexity of natural processes” (back cover).

The model is based on an analysis of didactic models (Bertin *et al.*, 2010, Carré, Moisan & Poisson, 1997, Houssaye, 1988, Legendre, 1988 and Germain, 1989, Rézeau, 2001, Rivens Mompean, 2013). It is in keeping with our systemics approach in that it models the learning environment as made up of interacting systems which are mutually dependent. There are five main elements: learners, teachers, objectives of the course, tools and contexts. The context is multi-layered; it ranges from European language policies and the local language policy of the school/university, to the premises and the equipment, as well as the academic and professional context – in our case study, the musicology department and the students’ future occupations. The tools play a mediation role between content and learners and teachers – for example, course materials, the syllabus, as well as digital tools. The main processes at work in the system are the learning and teaching processes.

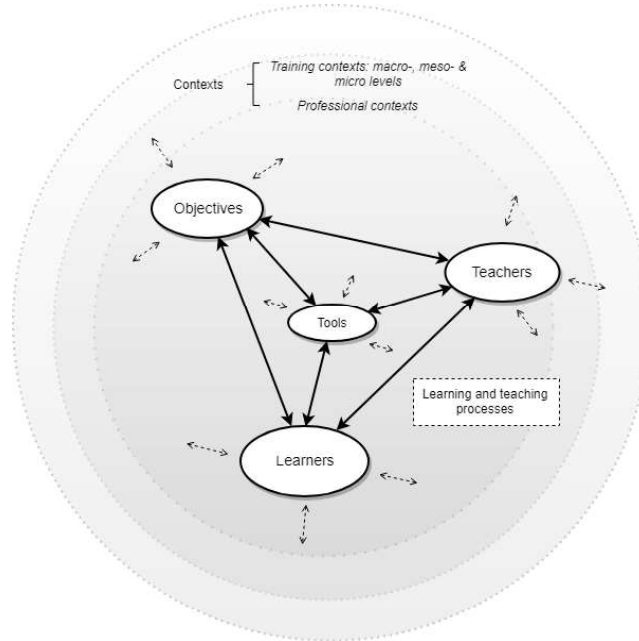


Figure 4 – Model of a generic learning environment

3.2. Needs analysis and the objectives of the new course

The next step was a needs analysis. It consisted in using this generic model to guide the analysis of the specific context of the English training course for undergraduate musicology students at the University of Lille. To do so, questionnaires were submitted to the learners and former undergraduate musicology students, as well as the English teachers and the supervisors. Two facts stood out:

1. When asked whether they were satisfied with the classes they had so far, the 43 learners who responded rated their English classes 2.3 (out of 5) on average, with clear differences between first year (Y1) students (3.3) and Y2 students (1.5), when Y3 students gave the course an average rating of 2.5. The scores given by the four teachers who responded varied a lot, ranging from 1 to 5.
2. Despite there being 12 two-hour English classes for each of the 6 semesters of the undergraduate programme, 58% of the learners declared that they felt they had stagnated or regressed since starting university.

The data gathered from the needs analysis, summarized in the figure below (Figure 2), helps explain these unsatisfactory results:

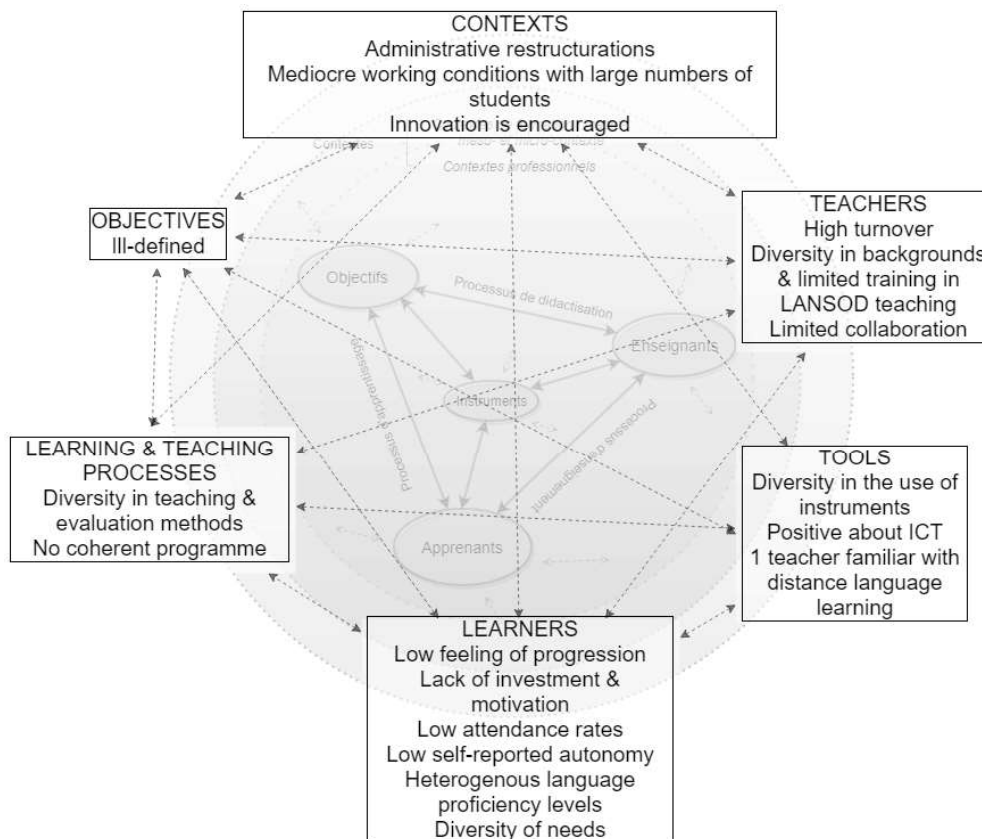


Figure 2 – Description of the learning environment

Data suggests the objectives of the course were ill-defined and that there was no coherent programme from Year 1 to Year 3. The working conditions were mediocre in that there were many students per group (between 30 and 50) and technological equipment was often lacking in classrooms. The learners had heterogeneous language proficiency levels (ranging from A1 to native speakers) and different needs in English, as their professional objectives varied (professional musician, primary school teacher, music teacher in secondary school amongst others). Half of the students declared they were not autonomous language learners. A majority of them also stressed they lacked motivation, especially as they were often quite engaged in extra-curricular activities (such as giving music lessons). In this university attendance is not compulsory (except for evaluations) and absenteeism rates were quite high as most teachers indicated hardly ever having more than half of the students in Year 2 and Year 3. Teachers rarely taught for more than a semester and they had little if no training in LANSOD teaching. Collaborative work was encouraged by the coordinator but the attempts were seen as timid and not always successful.

Based on these elements, ten objectives were selected for the new training course: obtaining a higher satisfaction level from learners and teachers (Objective 1), obtaining better results from students' self-assessment of linguistic development (Objective 2), proposing a clearer definition of the objectives to all actors (Objective 3), reducing teachers' workload and propose a coherent and flexible three-year syllabus (Objective 4), improving working conditions for learners and teachers (Objective 5), taking the diversity of learners' needs into consideration in the design of the syllabus (Objective 6), encouraging investment and personal

work outside the classroom (Objective 7), guiding learners towards more autonomy (Objective 8), motivating learners (Objective 9), as well as obtaining an attendance rate which is satisfactory to teachers (Objective 10).

4. Presentation of the blended course

4.1. Rationale for a blended format

The systemic conception of a training course led us to state that a blended format would necessarily impact learners, teachers, contents and the learning and teaching processes. Therefore, when setting up the course, we hypothesized that choosing a blended format would help us reach all the objectives stated above, as it is underlined in Figure 3 below:

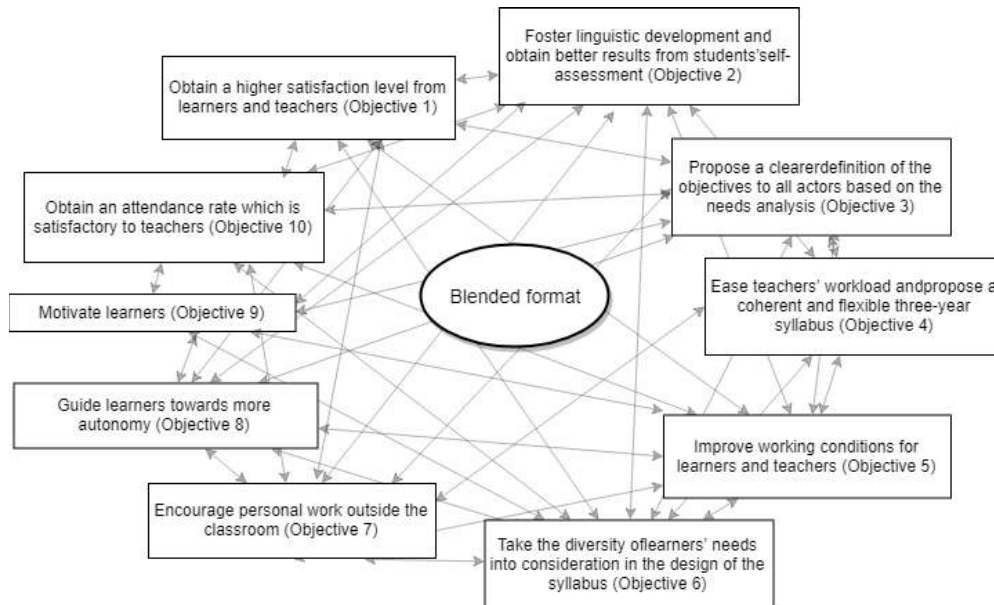


Figure 3 – Potential impact of the blended format on the objectives of the course

Let us see precisely how we intended to reach the ten goals thanks to a blended approach. The blended format was aimed to help reach Objectives 5 and 6, that is improving working conditions of learners and teachers and taking the diversity of learners' needs into consideration in the design of the syllabus. Because there were many students per group and the learners displayed heterogenous levels, the blended system would enable us to divide groups into smaller groups based on language proficiency. Even though the learning objectives would be the same for both advanced and intermediate students, there could be several ways to differentiate contents (Perrenoud, 2005: 29): in addition to a core syllabus, specific activities could be provided for both groups both in class and online (Nissen, 2019: 48), and the in-class pace could be adjusted accordingly. A blended system would also provide for a variety of learning approaches and materials, and a blended system would provide the learners with more flexibility in terms of time, place and pace (for example Nicolson *et al.*, 2011, Sharma & Westbrook, 2016).

To encourage investment and personal work outside the classroom (Objective 7), the online modules could be closely integrated with the face-to-face classes in a flipped classroom approach; content delivery seen online would have to be mastered to perform tasks in class. The online modules could be marked to foster motivation and thus to encourage students to be exposed to English at least once every two weeks if they did not come to face-to-face classes.

As completing an online module could be considered as attendance, the blended approach might help improve the attendance rate overall and hence reach Objective 10.

A blended course necessarily implies greater autonomy from learners who have to adapt to an unusual format (Objective 8). As Linda Murphy and Margaret Hurd underline,

A blended learning environment provides more/different choices and decisions for learners, so arguably increases the opportunity for learners to exercise their capacity for autonomy. (2011: 45)

Teacher support is considered paramount, so each module could end on a feedback activity to be discussed in face-to-face classes.

The objectives and the way the course works, the description of each face-to-face class as well as the calendar of the course could all be presented on the online learning platform so as to propose a clearer definition of the objectives to all actors based on the needs analysis (Objective 3). Because of the high turnover of the teacher squad, setting up a blended system might help define more coherent objectives for the three-year undergraduate programme. It could be designed so that teachers would have a comparable workload with face-to-face only classes (Objective 4).

Choosing a blended format is often justified as a means to optimize the language learning process, that is to reach Objective 2 here. However, the arguments are generally not compelling enough:

[There is] a high degree of agreement between the reasons given in the literature for blending and the reasons given by language providers in the case studies they describe, in particular with regard to increased access, flexibility and “improved pedagogy” (Wittaker & Tomlinson, 2013). The latter is often cited, but it is difficult to pin down what is meant and it is generally left unsupported. (Sharma & Westbrook, 2016: 324)

In our case, we hypothesized that thanks to a close integration of the online modules and the face-to-face classes with a flipped classroom approach and more time spent on production in class, learners would improve. Likewise, our systemic stance led us to hypothesize that by trying to reach the other objectives, thanks to the blended format especially, the new course would foster learner motivation (Objective 9) as well as teacher and learner satisfaction (Objective 1).

4.2. *General presentation of the blended course*

The new training course followed these guidelines. In concrete terms, in semester 1, the course combined face-to-face and online sessions, group (A&B) and half-group (A/B) sessions as illustrated in Figure 4 below. The online modules were specifically designed for this course on the Moodle learning platform and were mostly devoted to receptive skills, when face-to-face classes were more focussed on oral and written production.

These groups then alternated between face-to-face and online sessions. For example, in week 1 all the students came to class; in week 2 group A (the advanced group) did the online module and then came to class in week 3, while group B (the lower proficiency group) came to class on week 2 and did the online module in week 3.

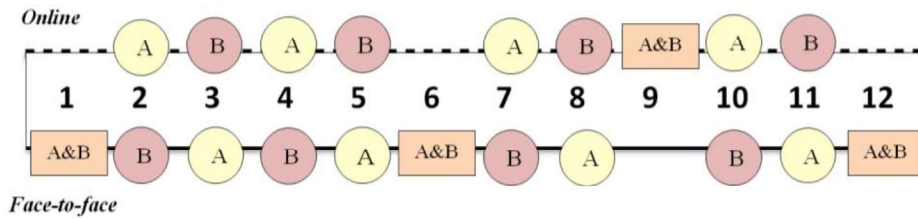


Figure 4 – Organisation of the blended course (semester 1)

The syllabus was organized around tasks. These tasks were mostly focussed on contents linked to music, with a gradual transition towards more professional English from Y1 to Y3. Learners were encouraged to work on the instructional content online and then perform tasks in class, such as “pitching the project of a music festival to sponsors,” “designing the programme of the festival” in Year 1, “teaching an introductory music class” and “design a professional resume” in Year 3.

5. Impact of the blended format on the course

5.1. Results

The new blended training course was then set up over the course of four semesters, from September 2016 to April 2018. At the end of each semester, the course was evaluated thanks to questionnaires submitted to the learners and the teachers, teachers’ weekly diaries and data obtained on Moodle². The results detailed below concern the first semester.

Based on the data collected, it appears most of the objectives were reached. Learners and teachers alike could explicit the main objectives of the course (Objective 3). Thanks to the blended system, we were able to divide each group in two level groups. Learners and teachers alike scored the groups based on language proficiency 4.4 out of 5. The teachers also remarked there had been more teamwork. Overall, the working conditions of learners and teachers thus improved (Objective 5). 56% of learners were satisfied with their investment in the course; when 20% had previously declared working regularly, the number rose to 60% with the new course (Objective 7). 67% of learners wrote they were now more autonomous language learners (Objective 8). 69% of learners declared having come to all or all but one face-to-face class. 71% of the students completed all the online modules (Objective 10).

Choosing a blended format thus helped us reach the main objectives of the course, that is get a higher satisfaction rate from learners and teachers (Objective 1) and obtain better results from students’ self-assessment (Objective 2). Indeed, the learner’s satisfaction rate went from 2.3 to 3.7. Teachers’ scores were more homogenous than before and also improved to 3.7. 73% of learners considered they had progressed. The great majority of learners considered the training course was adapted to their needs as 71% scored it 4 or more out of 5 (Objective 6). Learners also declared being more motivated than before, assessing their motivation levels during the semester at 3.6 on average (Objective 9).

However, the workload of the teacher in charge of creating the course was considerable (Objective 4).

6. Discussion

The new training course seems to have been successful, and the blended approach appears to have been instrumental in its success. However, the blended system is not the only element which accounts for these results and the analysis above should be read with caution.

² Thus, the evaluation relied on qualitative methods essentially, as we aimed at collecting the actors’ representations of the training course.

In a systemic approach, it is accepted that all elements and processes are linked and impact one another. Although in terms of epistemological and theoretical stance it helps us understand a training course better, this approach is nonetheless not methodologically very handy. Joël de Rosnay states that ideally, each element is considered individually and its influence on the behaviour of the various sub-components of the system is evaluated (1975: 123). Some studies of restricted phenomena in second language learning adopting this methodology are very convincing. To investigate second language learner motivation in class, Freerkien Waninge, Kees De Bot and Zoltán Dörnyei (2014) carried out an individual-level microanalysis on four students by having the learners write down their levels of motivation every five minutes while researchers took many variables into account. In our study of a whole training course however, it becomes impossible to identify all factors that hindered or favoured a specific process in such a complex dynamic system. We are far from an experimental approach with which it is possible to isolate variables and assess their impact with a fairly high degree of certainty. One can only voice hypotheses by highlighting which elements and processes seem to have had the most significant influence on the training course, and only tentatively discuss the impact one element (here the blended system) seems to have had on the rest of the system.

Other factors account for the success of the course. Table 1 below is part of the evaluation board of the new blended course. It is a synthesis of the main problems that were identified thanks to the needs analysis, the objectives the new course aimed to meet, and the means to reach those goals.

Problems	Objectives of the new training course	Means to reach these objectives
Teachers' and learners' low satisfaction levels	1. Obtain a higher satisfaction level from learners and teachers	Take the results of the needs analysis into account to design the new training course
Learners' feelings of low progress	2. Foster linguistic development and obtain better results from students' self-assessment	Support motivation, investment and language practice
Ill-defined objectives	3. Propose a clearer definition of the objectives to all actors based on the needs analysis	Propose & set up a flexible syllabus based on the results of the needs analysis
Important turnover, little experience in LANSOD teaching for some, mediocre collaborative work	4. Ease teachers' workload and propose a coherent and flexible three-year syllabus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Propose & set up a flexible syllabus based on the results of the needs analysis - Propose reusable teaching materials - Propose a training course encouraging collaboration
Mediocre working conditions	5. Improve working conditions for learners and teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce the number of students per group - Divide groups based on language proficiency
Diversity of needs	6. Take the diversity of learners' needs into consideration in the design of the syllabus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce the number of students per group - Divide groups based on language proficiency - Propose activities that foster individualized learning
Little student investment	7. Encourage personal work outside the classroom	Ambitious and motivating syllabus
Learners' feelings of low language learning autonomy	8. Guide learners towards more autonomy	Syllabus and teaching methods aimed at fostering autonomous learning
Learners' unsatisfactory motivation levels	9. Motivate learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implement the objectives stated above - Reinstate the importance of language learning - Frequent evaluations
Unsatisfactory attendance rate	10. Obtain an attendance rate which is satisfactory to teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implement the objectives stated above - Make attendance more constraining

Table 2 – Evaluation board of the new English blended learning course: Problems, Objectives and Means

The elements that are highlighted are considered to be directly linked to the blended dimension of the course. We can see how many other factors interact with this aspect of the course, which were also key in its success. For example, the learning objectives were better defined, the contents were more relevant to the learners' needs, and the teachers were highly invested.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to demonstrate how systemics can be instrumental in all the steps involved in setting up and evaluating a blended language training course. It helped us define the research object better, and it guided the needs analysis and the interpretation of the results. Indeed, the systemic approach first prompted us to define a training course as a complex system made up of interrelated sub-systems, elements and processes. This led to the creation of a model used as a grid for the needs analysis. The results of the needs analysis helped us have a global understanding of the various elements and processes at work in the learning environment, which in turn determined the design of the new training course. As far as interpreting the results is concerned, the principles on which the systemic approach relies led us to qualify the impact the blended system might have had on the overall positive results of the new training course, as other factors were also key in its success. In this respect, further analyses are required, by investigating more specifically how each pole of the model was impacted by the blended system for example.

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