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HYBRID ESP COURSES AS A PART
OF AN INCLUSIVE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. *Against the backdrop of societal changes, technological advance and developments in pedagogical methodology, inclusion and modern education can be considered in terms of learning modes and language teaching. Hence the article presents a study of the students' and faculty's attitudes and perceptions to hybrid academic ESP courses. A survey was conducted in 2023 at a Bulgarian university and its results are discussed with regard to course design and the introduction of inclusive and innovative practices that lead to increased involvement, motivation and opportunities for learning in an academic context.*

Key words: *ESP, ESP courses, hybrid ESP courses, inclusive environment, inclusion*

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on equality, inclusion in education has been in the focus of experts, researchers and policymakers for several decades and encompasses all educational components, such as curricula, teaching and pedagogy. Throughout the years, different aspects of inclusion mattered more and required action and effort: gender, race, religion, ethnicity, disability, exceptional gifts, social background. If inclusion in education is successful, then inclusion in society will be successful as well, and more people will be able to realise their potential and strive for accomplishment. This development can be traced in literature and documents, for instance UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960, registered at the UN in 1962) aimed at "furthering for all universal respects for human rights and equality of educational opportunity" (UNESCO, 1962, p. 2), UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action, Sustainable Goal 4 (2015) where UN member states reaffirmed the importance of inclusion and equity in education with a focus on participation and learning outcomes.

Scholarly thought investigated various aspects of inclusion in order to develop relevant, sustainable and thorough educational policies and solutions. Florian (2008) deals with the differences between "special" and "inclusive" education following United Nations' policies and in the context of human and educational rights. Kirschner (2015) considers inclusive education based on diverse disabilities and learning needs. Discussing inclusion as a term in a narrow and broader sense, she notes its relation to social justice -

the access of all marginalized social groups to education. If equity in class is ensured, then educational needs can be met and personal accomplishment achieved. Hence inclusive classroom becomes of underlying importance.

According to Schuelka (2017), inclusive education aims to overcome barriers to the access to school for everyone and to provide environment that facilitates learning process. In addition, Ferreira (2022) highlights the significance of resource planning, stakeholders' involvement and teachers' role. Mirzakhmedova et al. (2023) see equal opportunities for all students, disabled and able-bodied, as a way to "pursue higher education" and a prerequisite to become "worthy successors for tomorrow" (Mirzakh-medova et al., 2023, p. 2). Silva and Oliveira (2022) focus on digital inclusion and its contribution to the facilitation of teaching and learning in line with Levy's view (1993) that technological inclusion is beneficial in the digital era and for the digital generations with regard to knowledge dissemination and acquisition by contributing to the formation of networks of experiences and interactions. As far as inclusive interactive learning environments are concerned, Molina Roldán et al. (2021) state that "based on the existing knowledge … learning interactions among diverse students are a key component of educational inclusion" (Molina Roldán et al., 2021, p. 1). The Council of Europe (2018) considers inclusion "a right of all citizens" (CEFR, 2018, p. 13) when developing and updating the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and hence sees it as an opportunity for everyone to improve and have better chances for personal and career development in a globalised world. In this respect, Stadler-Heer (2019) points out that games, computer-assisted technology, project work and drama techniques enhance student engagement and motivation for learning and result in improved learning achievements.

In the position paper on inclusive English language teaching that Oxford University Press presented in 2020, experts in the field draw the attention of the ELT community to pedagogy and the materials produced and provided in language teaching based on inclusive practices. With this regard, Kormos (2017) concludes that "the communicative and collaborative approaches in language teaching offer valuable opportunities for inclusive learning" (Kormos, 2017, as cited in OUP Position Paper, p. 8). Further on, she sums up:

"The communicative methodologies and materials commonly used in English language classrooms promote a largely learner-centred and interactive learning environment, in contrast to the more traditional teacher-led methods often used in other subjects. Communicative ELT activities can sometimes highlight communication or social interaction difficulties. At the same time, the English language classroom is an environment which is particularly suitable for inclusive practices because of the opportunities it provides for promoting cooperation between learners." (Kormos 2017 as cited in OUP Position Paper, p. 7)

In the same paper, her colleague and co-author Daloiso (2017) states that:

"Guided by a principle of equity, teachers can make the most of the materials available to offer an inclusive learning experience to their learners by following guidelines on differentiation, classroom management, multisensory and multimodal learning, and learning strategies." (Daloiso, 2017, as cited in OUP Position Paper, p. 25).

It becomes evident that implementing inclusive policies, creating inclusive environments and applying inclusive methodologies are major aspects of modern education as a basis of sustainable personal and societal development.

With reference to the author's university, inclusion is taken into consideration at an institutional level and in line with both academic autonomy and globally accepted educational standards. The university efforts involve the following aspects: environ-mental – ensuring an accessible environment for disabled students, as well as for all students by using modern technologies; encouragement of gifted students – introduction of initiatives aimed at these students' personal accomplishment along with the opportunities for scholarships, international mobility and exchanges, internships in ministries and leading business organisations, participation in competitions and contests; development of curricula involving technologies and new modes of training. It is these curricula and new modes of training as a way to include students who for some reason cannot attend face-to-face classes that came into the focus of the research presented in this article.

2. ACADEMIC ESP COURSES

2.1. ESP courses

The ESP courses that universities offer depend on their profiles and are usually based on the labour market requirements within a knowledge-based economy. At the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), students study English as a first and second language for the specialties admitting applicants with language tests and as a foreign language for the specialties without language admission tests. This means that the former do a two-year course and then sit a state exam, while the latter do a one-year course and take an ordinary exam at the end of the summer semester. The levels vary between B1 and C1 of CEFR: B1 for the specialties without language admission tests, B2 for the second foreign language of the specialties with language admission tests and, correspondingly, C1 for their first foreign language. The ESP curricula for all students are based on the specifics of the subject matter, which means that professional terminology is paid special attention along with the acquisition of functional communi-cative competence – the specialised knowledge and skills students need in order to function successfully in professional contexts. Course syllabi are based on communicative methodology meaning that the key objective is the balanced acquisition of all skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) and the educational process involves modern technologies so as to ensure training that students find motivating and engaging, as well as based on authentic situations and materials from real professional contexts and daily routine. They are designed for face-to-face traditional classes and using them for online or hybrid courses results in lower effectiveness and lower stakeholder motivation and engagement. Attendance is obligatory and there is ongoing assessment which means that unless students come to the university and participate actively in the learning process in class, they will be unable to acquire the material planned and will be unsuccessful in doing the course and passing the exam. Given the economic and social situation in the country, the majority of students start working in their first year of study in order to cover their expenses and to be able to afford to graduate. It makes it difficult or impossible for them to attend lectures and seminars regularly even if they are willing to and make efforts to meet course requirements. Hence taking into account the pandemic experience and the rapid emergence of new educational technologies and teaching approaches, developing hybrid ESP courses stands out as a viable option to achieve several

goals – being flexible and thus attractive to more students, offering high quality courses based on and involving recent scientific developments, enhancing learner and teacher motivation in the learning process.

2.2. Hybrid ESP courses

The advent of new technologies resulted in changes of social and business life. Modern devices and ways of communication introduced people to new realities at home and at work – using computers and mobile phones to reach people in distant corners of the world or to prepare reports, process information, make arrangements or meet. The new generations grow up using a variety of devices to learn, interact and work, which leads to differences in their values, behaviour, perceptions. All these facts require careful consideration and adjustment in education. At the same time, technological advance allows the use of modern technologies in order to solve problems in education and implement policies in support of inclusion and learning facilitation. Thus, distance learning emerged and learners from remote places were enabled to educate themselves. The electronic mode of teaching and learning made it possible for learners from disadvantaged groups to study and improve their lives and career prospects.

During the pandemic, higher education institutions (HEIs) were faced with the challenge of teaching and examining via the Internet and of using platforms for content and learning management regardless of the voices against the new modes of teaching. Educational institutions switched to e-learning for almost two years. At UNWE, the educational process during the pandemic started in the e-mode, but at the end of the period and having considered these voices, it transformed into a hybrid one. The reasons for this were the need stakeholders had to communicate and attend classes face to face, the weaknesses of e-learning related to assessment, feedback and the perception that the traditional face-to-face mode provides for more effective acquisition and performance.

Among the challenges of the emergency introduction of the electronic and hybrid modes of instruction was the lack of materials tailored to the remote and hybrid courses. Adjustment was a temporary option that could not ensure maximised educational results. However, these two modes revealed a potential worth exploring and availing of. Regardless of the fact that the e- and hybrid modes might be more expensive in terms of hardware and software, their implementation showed that the opportunities they offer make them part of modern education. Therefore, taking into account the university mission and policy to provide quality education to learners from different backgrounds, the development of hybrid academic ESP courses became a need and desire. Alberts et al. (2010) conclude that by blending two modes of instruction – traditional and online ones it is possible to take advantage of the strengths each of them has and at the same time minimise the negative effects of their weaknesses. This view is supported by Snart (2010) for whom hybrid learning is "a fusion without a loss" (Snart, 2010, p. 57). In addition, Hall (2010) points to the flexibility of the hybrid mode in terms of time, location and learning pace. Dziuban et al. (2018) see hybrid education as the new traditional educational mode and Singh et al. (2021) find the introduction of academic hybrid courses a practical option leading to "improvement in students' time management skills, critical thinking skills, and comprehension skills" (Singh et al., 2021 p. 144).

Alberts et al. (2010) recommend a set of pedagogical principles that should be followed in the design of hybrid courses: learning should be based on expected outcomes in terms of course content and a range of cognitive skills; learning programmes should require students' active involvement; students should be encouraged to communicate and collaborate with the teacher and peers; teaching should create a learner-centred environment; it should accommodate different learning styles; it should provide timely and constructive feedback on learning; it should support learners to become autonomous; and should encourage and provide opportunities for student reflection on learning (Alberts et al., 2010, pp. 189-195). Kersten (2023) emphasizes the beneficial use of online analytical and knowledge-based systems that result in an engaging and collaborative environment facilitating ESP acquisition.

3. A STUDY OF FACULTY'S AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO HYBRID ACADEMIC ESP COURSES

In order to design and develop hybrid academic ESP courses and, in particular, courses that meet the needs of the students majoring in economics, law and socio-political studies, a UNWE project was initiated with a focus on this issue. The project team includes four faculty members and is led by the author. The study includes a survey of UNWE students and faculty aimed at finding out what their attitudes are to this type of courses. The research team was interested in establishing how the respondents perceive the hybrid mode in comparison with the traditional and online ones in terms of ESP acquisition, relevance to students' future careers, assessment, teaching materials, performance, inclusion. Based on the survey results and after an extensive literature survey, hybrid academic ESP courses will be designed and materials banks for teachers and students provided. A questionnaire was prepared, on the basis of the teams experience and the principles suggested by Alberts et al. (2010), including twenty-one questions of which two intended to collect personal data such as year of study and specialty for the student respondents and years of experience and professional field for the faculty respondents. One question, question 19, is an open-ended one intended to collect comments about the courses, that could complement the data collected with the rest of the questions and allow for the development of adequate guidelines for course design and selection of materials for the material banks. The rest of the questions are either based on a five-point Likert scale or are multiple choice ones. A structured online survey was carried out and responses were received from thirty-four lecturers and two hundred and forty students. The student sample incudes respondents from 17 programmes/specialties, of whom 48% freshmen and 40% sophomores. The faculty sample includes mostly experienced lecturers: 29% with experience of over 25 years, 29% - 16-25 years, 39% - 6-15 years and only 3% - 1-5 years. Of them 68% teach subject, 21 % - English and 11% teach both subject and English.

Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the responses for the rest of the questions in the survey.

Table 1 Likert scale questions

Questions	Students	Faculty
1. Hybrid academic ESP courses are part of modern education	31% strongly agree; 53% agree; 13% neither agree, nor disagree; 3% disagree; 1% strongly disagree	44% strongly agree; 50% agree; 6% disagree
2. Hybrid academic ESP courses provide for greater flexibility	38% strongly agree; 50% agree; 8% neither agree, nor disagree; 3% disagree; 2% strongly disagree	56 % strongly agree; 38% agree; 6% neither agree, nor disagree
3. Hybrid academic ESP courses enable students to work and study	37% strongly agree; 42% agree; 12% neither agree, nor disagree; 6% disagree; 3% strongly disagree	12% strongly agree; 71% agree; 12% neither agree, nor disagree; 3% disagree; 3% strongly disagree
4. Hybrid academic ESP courses increase learner motivation compared to traditional and online courses	21% strongly agree; 40% agree; 25% neither agree, nor disagree; 9% disagree; 5% strongly disagree	12% strongly agree; 41% agree; 32% neither agree, nor disagree; 9% disagree; 6% strongly disagree
5. Hybrid academic ESP courses enhance learner achievements compared to the traditional and online ones	8% strongly agree; 46% agree; 28% neither agree, nor disagree; 8% disagree; 10% strongly disagree	9% strongly agree; 32% agree; 32% neither agree, nor disagree; 21% disagree; 6% strongly disagree
9. Students are interested in creating content for their ESP course (giving ideas, suggesting topics/activities, etc.)	14% strongly agree; 49% agree; 29% neither agree, nor disagree; 6% disagree; 2% strongly disagree	18% strongly agree; 44% agree; 23% neither agree, nor disagree; 9% disagree; 6% strongly disagree
13. Hybrid academic ESP courses are more appropriate for modern learners' style of learning and communicating	27% strongly agree; 50% agree; 14% neither agree, nor disagree; 6% disagree; 3% strongly disagree	24% strongly agree; 44% agree; 21% neither agree, nor disagree; 6% disagree; 6% strongly disagree
15. ESP learning is more effective and modern if students have access to banks of multimedia resources and materials for hybrid training	35% strongly agree; 46% agree; 14 % neither agree, nor disagree; 3% disagree; 2% strongly disagree	32% strongly agree; 53% agree; 12% neither agree, nor disagree; 3% disagree
16. Do you think that the creation and exchange of banks of multimedia resources and materials for hybrid training lead to enhanced learner motivation?	25% strongly agree; 49% agree; 19 % neither agree, nor disagree; 5% disagree; 2% strongly disagree	18% strongly agree; 62% agree; 14% neither agree, nor disagree; 6% disagree
17. Do you think that the creation and exchange of banks of multimedia resources and mate-rials for hybrid training lead to enhanced course effectiveness	25% strongly agree; 50% agree; 19% neither agree, nor disagree; 5% disagree; 1% strongly disagree	24% strongly agree; 56% agree; 14% neither agree, nor disagree; 3% disagree; 3% strongly disagree
18. Hybrid ESP courses prepare students for their work in the future by creating an environment similar to their professional environment after their graduation	27% strongly agree; 45% agree; 21% neither agree, nor disagree; 4% disagree; 3% strongly disagree	21% strongly agree; 44% agree; 26% neither agree, nor disagree; 6% disagree; 3% strongly disagree

Source: author's project research

Table 2 Multiple choice questions

Questions	Students	Faculty
6. In your opinion, which are more beneficial and effective for students' future career:	59% - hybrid; 25% - traditional; 16% - online	65% - hybrid; 32% - traditional; 3% - online
7. Hybrid academic ESP courses cannot ensure:	33% - objective assess-ment; 34% - detailed feed-back about prog-ress; 31% - discussions with the teacher about performance; other[*]	43% - objective assess-ment; 26% - detailed feedback about pro-gress; 31% - discuss-ions with the teacher about performance
8. Which mode provides for the contact with the teacher that you need:	45% - hybrid; 45% - tra-ditional; 10% - online	38% - hybrid; 59%-tra-ditional; 3% - online
10. Students are more involved in the learning process if the course is:	43% - hybrid; 44% - tra-ditional; 13% - online	44% - hybrid; 53% - traditional; 3% - online
11. Which mode of assessment is the most effective one:	47% - hybrid; 40% - tra-ditional; 13% - online	21% - hybrid; 76% - traditional; 3% - online
12. Which mode is more effective in terms of student skills and knowledge of specialised English:	48% - hybrid; 39% - tra-ditional; 13% - online	47% - hybrid; 50% - traditional; 3% - online
14. The academic ESP courses that equip me with the specialised knowledge and skills I need for my future career are:	54% - hybrid; 32% - traditional; 14% - online	65% - hybrid; 32% - traditional; 3% - online

Source: author's project research

[*] Other – indicated more options as more than one answer is possible: a & c; a, b & c; b & c; a & b

Analysing the data, it is possible to make the following inferences: general attitude of both groups favours the hybrid mode in terms of flexibility, modern education, opportunity to work and study. They seem equally convinced in the advantages of hybrid training. With regard to motivation, it should be noted that although over half of the respondents from both groups find the hybrid mode more motivating, there is a hesitant fraction within each group – a quarter of the students and a third of the lecturers, which should be given consideration. A similar situation is observed with the perceptions of performance and content creation: more than 50% of the sample agree that learning outcomes improve and interest in content creation is greater, but there are some differences, as well as questions to answer. With regard to question 5, over half of the students believe that this is so, while only 41% of the faculty see it this way. Within the faculty group there is a third of hesitant respondents and a little more than a quarter who disagree and find the other two modes more beneficial. Over a quarter of the student respondents have no definite opinion about the level of achievements. A good starting point would be to elaborate and find the reasons for this position. This could provide insights into the optimised design of course syllabi and avoidance of methodological mistakes that could exacerbate the weaknesses of the modes instead of amplifying the effect of combining them. As for the responses to question 9, the same percentage of each group (63-62%) are positive, but the subgroups of those who are not convinced or disapprove are worth examining. Is it because they would not like to bother about improvements or is it because they expect university management (for the faculty) or the lecturer (for the students) to take care of this and be the resourceful stakeholder in the educational process?

When asked about the appropriateness of hybrid courses in the modern social and occupational contexts (question 9), almost two thirds of both respondent groups are positive that they provide the best option of the three modes. However, the number of students and faculty members who hesitate comprises about a fifth of the sample, which could give a direction for future investigation.

Questions 15-17 are designed to collect information about the respondents' views of the preparation and exchange of banks of materials and learner access to them. An impressive majority (some 80%) is convinced in the beneficial effect of this measure which confirms the research team's belief that having such banks could facilitate ESP acquisition, contribute to more objective assessment and stimulate greater learner engagement.

An interesting finding was the respondents' reaction to question 18 about the connection between the material taught and its relevance to the students' future careers in terms of environmental specifics. Although the vast majority of both respondent groups see the connection, a fifth (21%) of the students and a surprising quarter (26%) of the lecturers are hesitant. This raises questions with regard to the awareness of the students' professional context, appropriateness of the materials used and of the teaching methodology applied. Establishing the reasons for this result would contribute to the selection of the most appropriate approach for the development of the course and the preparation of materials banks.

As far as the analysis is concerned of the data gathered about the multiple-choice questions focused on student involvement in the learning process, quality of ESP acquisition, impact on students' career prospects, assessment, disadvantages and contact with the teacher, it can be concluded that:

- The hybrid mode is perceived as the most beneficial of the three modes;
- The weaknesses of the hybrid mode mentioned in the questionnaire or what hybrid courses cannot ensure (objective assessment, feedback from the teacher about learner progress and discussions related to performance) are considered equally significant in terms of learner success and satisfaction with hybrid training, with lecturers feeling that objective assessment poses the greatest challenge to teaching in a hybrid mode. When assessment alone is discussed, faculty are definitely in favour of traditional classes, whereas students find the hybrid mode a little more effective compared to the traditional one;
- Faculty find traditional face-to-face contact with students most effective and beneficial to the educational process, while students perceive traditional and hybrid modes as equally beneficial;
- Asked about course effectiveness, lecturers consider traditional courses a little more effective than the hybrid ones, while students share the opposite opinion. However, in terms of course relevance to students' future careers, both respondent groups see the hybrid mode as the most appropriate option. This could be explained with a similarity of the work and learning environments and the belief that the training is based on authentic situations, materials and activities.

4. CONCLUSION

Following the strenuous research activity of the university ESP division, including a surveys of specialised vocabulary acquisition (Gatev, 2023), e-assessment (Ruskova-Todorova, 2023), student needs (Stefanova, 2021), the study of the attitudes to the hybrid

academic ESP courses conducted at UNWE will help to find out the emphases to be laid in the development of courses providing for a language training meeting the needs of learners and stakeholders through the facilitation of the acquisition of functional communicative competence in a stimulating and inclusive environment. What is more, the results from the survey will contribute to the creation of banks of adequate and relevant materials in terms of teaching and assessment. In addition, the courses and materials banks prepared following the guidelines based on the study can be used as a benchmark for the development of hybrid courses for courses in other HEIs and for other subjects thus reflecting the new socio-economic realities in education. In turn, this could result in ensuring a learning-enhanced environment (Burskaitiene & Sliogeriene, 2018), greater motivation for learning, improved student performance and, finally, more qualified graduates on the labour market.

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