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Implementation of a Multilingual Blended Learning Course for Non-formal and Informal Adult Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

Due to the COVID19 pandemic, traditional face-to-face learning was replaced by distance education, e-learning, online learning and blended learning at all education levels, including adult education. Learning Management Systems (LMS) are crucial in organising an efficient pedagogical process online and ensuring that learners attain learning outcomes. The current research, conducted in six EU countries – Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and Czechia, evaluates the suitability of the LMS to non-formal and informal adult learning for various target groups when face-to-face adult education was restricted. The research involved 638 participants, 209 of them were learners with barriers to learning. The participants studied the blended learning course created for non-formal and informal adult learning and filled in a feedback questionnaire after its acquisition. The results indicate overall learner satisfaction with the LMS and the course delivery, and the suitability of the LMS for regular adult learners and learners with cultural, social, and geographic barriers to learning both for non-formal and informal learning. The LMS is suitable for learners with economic obstacles for non-formal learning. However, learners with learning difficulties require special pedagogical approaches to support them to acquire the course in an online-only blended learning format.

K e y w o r d s: blended learning, Learning Management System (LMS), adult learners, learners with barriers, non-formal education, informal learning

Although distance education, remote teaching, online teaching/learning, e-learning, blended learning (BL) are not new approaches in adult pedagogy, they have become even more popular recently (Wiliamson et al., 2020) due to a significant increase in online learning by adults during the COVID-19 crisis. 'Much of the training that had started as face-to-face on classroom environments has been pushed online' (OECD, 2020c, p.1). Learning online, including BL, turned out to be a viable option for involving adult learners in learning activities in the given situation.

Historically, BL became popular at the beginning of the 21st century when educational institutions started combining online teaching/learning with face-to--face onsite teaching/learning (Rasheed et al., 2021). It was also successfully used for various adult education courses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cocquyt et al., 2019).

Due to its flexibility and cost-effectiveness, BL is considered an effective mode of instruction (Rasheed et al., 2021) that supports traditional forms of teaching (Tang et al., 2020). Its flexible and personalized curricula respond to student diversity (Bruggeman et al., 2021) and students 'may have a control over some elements such as time, place, and path of learning' (Ropero-Padilla et al., 2021, p.2). Furthermore, technology integration in BL courses facilitates students' interaction on online group projects, case studies and debates, thereby resulting in better attained learning outcomes (Gjestvang et al., 2021). However, due to the flexibility of BL, students spend relatively little time on performing tasks and therefore complain about missing collaboration with groupmates in a natural setting (Gjestvang et al., 2021).

Prior research on BL courses for adult learners focuses on learner engagement and satisfaction with the course design and implementation (Gao et al., 2020), which is essential both for face-to-face and technological environments to ensure an effective BL process (Chiu, 2021). Some studies analyse domestic and community barriers to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting technological, financial and pedagogical barriers (Habibi et al., 2021). Research conducted in Poland (Zajdel et al., 2021; Gorecka et al., 2021) highlight health issues experienced by teachers and learners as a result of extended periods of time spent in front of computer screens.

At the same time, other studies highlight certain advantages of learning online as well. Levpušček & Uršic (2021) stress that teaching/learning online enables incorporating various quizzes, videos, electronic presentations in lectures, which engage students in the learning process. Learners can access the learning content at any time and any place.

The fact that learning may take place anywhere, using any devices means it is ubiquitous learning. It is suitable to adult learners, especially those with geographic, social, and economic barriers to learning. This is in line with 'the concept of flexibility' defined in the recent Eurydice report (European Commission/

EACEA/Eurydice, 2021) wherein flexibility 'implies a greater choice in terms of time, place, pace, content and mode of learning' (ibid, p.95) which is especially significant for adults with barriers to education. The recently adopted *CONFINTEA VII* finds BL to be an 'effective means of reaching out to marginalized people and communities most in need of ALE', i.e., adult learning and education (UNESCO, 2022a, p.9).

Adult learning is a key component of lifelong learning, and it refers to all education levels, spaces and learning modalities – formal, non-formal and informal (UNESCO, 2022a, p.2). This article will analyse the LMS of the BL course created and implemented for non-formal and informal adult learning.

Non-formal adult education in this research is perceived as 'organized and systematized learning, conducted outside formal education which amplifies it, providing acquisition of knowledge and skills, necessary for economically and socially active citizens of the country' (Ogienko & Tereko, 2018, p.170) that ensures 'well-being of the adult population through offering possibilities for personal growth, lifelong learning and participation' (Nivala et al., 2021, p.3). Participation in non-formal adult education is voluntary (Hanemann, 2021). Informal adult learning takes place in various settings such as culture, work, social media, the Internet etc., enabling adults to enrich themselves (UNESCO, 2022b). It is seamless learning which leads to an increase in learners' capacity – improved knowledge, developed skills, broadened experience, etc.

Experience gained during the 'new normal' by education institutions worldwide indicates that online/blended learning will remain popular among adult learners in the future as well (Zajdel et al., 2021).

Problem of Research

Although prior research on applying BL in adult education during the COVID-19 pandemic exists, most of it refers to formal education. The evaluation of *Learning Management System* (LMS) and BL course implementation for various target groups of adult learners, including learners with barriers to learning, when real face-to-face meetings were restricted, is an insufficiently researched topic.

Research Focus

This research was conducted among six partner countries – Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and Czechia, within the Erasmus+ project "Cultural knowledge and language competences as a means to develop 21st century skills" (Project No.2018-1-HR-01-KA204-047430; 2018-2021). The aim of the project was to foster adult learners' 21st century skills and broaden their knowledge of the rich European intangible cultural heritage thereby enhancing their overall development and employability.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the suitability of the LMS chosen for the implementation of a BL course for non-formal and informal adult learning for

various target groups in these six partner countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, when novel ways had to be found to implement the BL course.

Course Description

The "European Culture-Based Multilingual Blended Learning Course" for adult learners comprises 18 modules in ten languages (English, Croatian, Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Latvian, Polish, Romanian, and Slovenian) and reflects the culture of each partner country in three comprehensive modules in these ten languages. The methodological approach to the course is depicted in Figure 1.
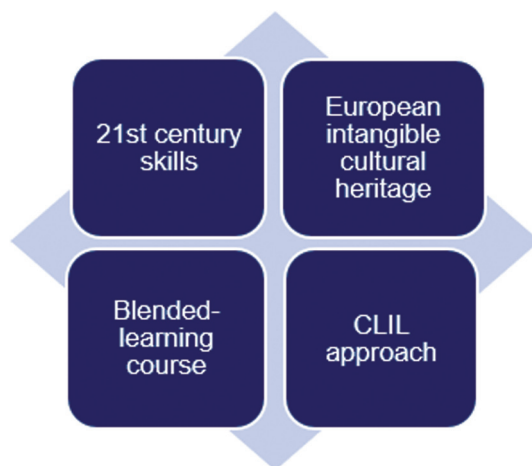

Figure 1. The methodological approach

S o u r c e: Own work

The CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology was applied to ensure simultaneous acquisition of both the course content and the target language (Marsh, 2002; Stevie, 2018). A story reflecting the rich European intangible cultural heritage forms the basis of each module and innovative teaching/learning methodologies and tools, such as webquests, case studies, vialogues, videos, audios, design thinking tools, interactive games, etc. have been used. In this research BL has been defined as 'learning facilitated by effectively combining different modes of delivery, models of teaching, and styles of learning' (Heinze & Procter, 2004, p.2) wherein interactive and problem-based face-to-face activities have been integrated into online learning to enhance the learners' 21st century skills.

A BL approach, comprising online and face-to-face stages, has been applied to provide a wide range of adult learners the opportunity to acquire cultural knowledge and develop 21st century skills at their own speed and convenience by selecting the most appropriate mode of learning for them – informal, non-formal or formal.

The course concept, its creation and methodologies as well as the specificity of adult learners have been analysed in prior research by the author (cf. Luka, 2019a; Luka, 2019b; Luka, 2021; Luka, 2022).

The course participants differ in terms of age, education level and occupational status, and some have barriers to learning (geographic, economic, cultural, social, and educational) as well.

Each module starts with online and/or face-to-face warm-up tasks leading up the main theme that presents the relevant cultural information. Face-to-face tasks (30-40%) have been combined with online tasks (60-70%) flexibly. Solutions to problem situations are suggested at the end of each module or open-ended questions are posed to stimulate further discussions. Thus, learners acquire cultural knowledge on the relevant theme and develop 21st century skills, as they progress through each module from the beginning to the end. The detailed curricula in each of the ten languages are available on the LMS (e-culture.eu, 2022).

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, face-to-face stage was implemented partly in class and partly on virtual learning platforms. The online stage was implemented on the designed Moodle LMS.

Learning Management System

'The learning environment is emphasized as a central component of the learning process' (Gjestvang et al., 2021, p.75). This refers both to traditional teaching/learning in the classroom and to all forms of learning online.

Technology-supported learning environments in education have been researched for more than 20 years (Müller & Wulf, 2021). In the late 1990s, higher education institutions started using LMS, for example, BlackBoard designed in 1997, to support students' learning. Nowadays 'LMS have become sophisticated platforms to support synchronous and asynchronous interactions' (Bryson & Andres, 2020, p.611), but their main functions remain the same: 'a) provision and organization of content; b) course management, including attendance, assessment, grade management and announcements, and c) communication tools' (ibid.).

Dobre (2015, p.314) divides LMSs into three groups: open-source LMSs, proprietary/commercial LMSs and cloud-based LMSs. In any type of LMS, interaction between people and system is ensured through electronic (in the current

research: computer, smartphone, tablet) and virtual means (in this research: Internet and videoconferencing applications).

Prior research on LMSs for online learning/BL concludes that LMSs must be user friendly (Hofmeister & Pilz, 2020), useful and playful generating student interest in the learning process and engaging learners in interaction (Gao et al., 2020). They must be convenient and innovative (Patra et al., 2021) enabling teachers to apply various teaching/learning methods and 'properly disseminate information and knowledge' (Roman & Plopeanu, 2020, p.4). They must provide synchronous and asynchronous learning activities (Rucsanda et al., 2021), enable 'combining recorded videos and live courses with greater online interaction' (Ionescu et al., 2020, p.3), consider students' learning styles and technological experience as well as include 'relevant and authentic assignments, and appropriate tools and technology' (Carrillo & Flores, 2020, p.474). They must also incorporate socio-emotional elements that enable learners feel the social presence (Dascalu et al., 2021) – one of the main challenges in learning online. Furthermore, they must comply with the learners' needs and expectations, and provide constant feedback to learners.

The assignments of the course focus on everyday situations in authentic environments, and include interactive elements. This approach is in line with the integrated approach by Carrillo & Flores (2020).

A user-friendly LMS 'should be a combination of pedagogical, social and technical parts' (Shi et al., 2021, p.2). To support student engagement, the LMS has to fulfil the three innate psychological needs of learners – the need for autonomy, the need for relatedness and the need for competence (Chiu, 2021). The need for autonomy involves flexibility and making one's own learning path, relatedness refers to experiencing the sense of belongingness to the group, and competence relates to professional and personal growth of learners. This points to the necessity of creating such a LMS that would enable using various teaching/learning methods (pedagogical component), engage learners in interaction (social component), secure the implementation of the learning process, and support learners in attaining their learning outcomes (technological component).

One of the most popular open-source LMSs, used in educational institutions worldwide, is the modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment (Moodle) (Silva & Souza, 2016; Lebeaux et al., 2020; Rawat et al., 2020). Launched on 20th August 2002, it currently has 328 million users, 1.899 billion enrolments, and 41 million courses in 244 countries comprising 356 million resources (Moodle, 2022). Due to the minimal costs and technical parameters, Moodle is a frequently used LMS for BL courses. One of its main advantages is the possibility of organizing teaching/learning material in modules, which is very convenient and easy to understand even for inexperienced learners (Rawat et al., 2020). Therefore, it was also one of the main LMSs used in many countries during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tomczyk, 2021; Rimkuvienė et al., 2021; Zajdel et al., 2021). Additionally, MS

Teams, Zoom, Cisco WebEx, Google Meet were often used for a synchronous communication with students. Moodle was used as the learning platform for the online learning stage of the target course (e-culture.eu, 2022) and the partners chose one of the above-mentioned synchronous communication channels for the face-to-face stage of learning.

Since technologies are changing, BL is changing as well (Prokhorets et al., 2015). Currently, the face-to-face stage is often implemented in an online synchronous mode using various virtual platforms and other technological means, instead of real-class meetings. Bryson & Andres (2020) call this transfer of BL to complete online learning with no real face-to-face meetings *online-only blended learning* wherein the 'LMS platform provides a resource repository to support engagement with online material, and real-time online learning encounters replace classroom-based teaching' (p.613). Thus, the role of LMSs is increasing.

Methodology of Research

Research Design

The current research applies a comparative research design to analyse the results more in-depth and carry out systematic interpretation (Boeren, 2019) by comparing the results among different countries and learner groups to evaluate the suitability of the LMS for course acquisition by various groups of adult learners in non-formal and informal education.

Sample of Research

Since the course has been planned for a wide group of adult learners, purposive sampling (Walliman, 2016) was used, which involved a broad range of adult learners of all ages, education levels and occupational status, and learners with geographic, economic, social, cultural, and educational barriers to learning. It was planned to attract 100 learners per country. However, since the Croatian partner did not succeed in involving the required number of learners, other partners invited more learners. In total, 638 learners participated in the research. Their profile is as follows:
- Participants' country: 83 learners (13.01%) were from Croatia, 111 (17.40%) – from Latvia, 122 (19.12%) – from Poland, 111 (17.40%) – from Romania, 104 (16.30%) – from Slovenia, and 107 (16.77%) – from Czechia.
- Gender: 228 male (35.74%) and 410 female (64.26%).
- Age: 272 respondents (42.63%) were aged 18-24, 73 respondents (11.44%) – aged 25–34, 55 (8.62%) – aged 35–44, 89 (13.95%) – aged 45–54, 60 (9.40%) – aged 55–65 and 88 (13.79%) were 65 and older.

- Education level: 38 (5.96%) had basic education, 231 (36.21%) – secondary education, 43 (6.74%) – vocational education, 50 (7.84%) – college education, 144 (22.57%) – Bachelor level education, 112 (17.55%) – Master level education, 19 (29.78%) – PhD level education.
- Occupational status: 271 (42.48%) were students, 226 (35.42%) – employees, 40 (6.27%) – employers, 39 (6.11%) – retired, 26 (4.08%) were not employed and 36 (5.64%) had not indicated their occupational status.
- 1/3 of the course participants, namely, 209 (32.76%) out of 638, were learners with barriers to learning: 67 learners had cultural and social barriers to learning, 73 – geographic barriers, 41 – economic obstacles to learning and 28 learners were with learning difficulties requiring special educational treatment.
- Technological capabilities: the majority of respondents used some technological devices on a daily basis (Table 1).

Table 1

Frequency of using technological devices on a daily basis, %

The usage	Technological devices		
	PC/Laptop	Smartphones	Tablets
More than 20 hours a week	50.8	64.9	4.7
Less than 20 hours a week	24.3	20.4	9.1
Few hours a week	14.7	11.1	16.1
Never/almost never	10.2	3.1	69.4
No data	0	0.5	0.6

S o u r c e: Own work

Instrument and Procedure

The research was conducted from March 2020 to January 2021. The course participants selected modules according to their interests and filled in the course evaluation questionnaire after the course. Constant pedagogical and technological support was provided by teachers during course acquisition through specially organised workshops and consultations.

A paper-based questionnaire of three parts: 1) socio-demographic data on participants, 2) evaluation of the LMS, the module content and the development of learners' 21st century skills (all 5-point Likert scale questions), 3) evaluation of learners' learning styles was used. Cronbach's Alpha reliability test shows a very good reliability and consistency among the variables under analysis ($\alpha = 0.924$). In this paper the author analyses the evaluation of the LMS based on the learners' profiles.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 23 software was applied to analyse the data employing descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha reliability test, and inferential statistics tests to discover significant differences among countries and target groups.

Research Ethics

The norms and standards of research ethics were observed ensuring the participants' anonymity, their voluntary participation in the research, causing no physical or psychological harm to them and securing protections against harm (Brancati, 2018). The participants were informed about the research purpose, data collection, analysis and presentation of the results prior to administering the questionnaire.

Results of Research

The findings indicate that, overall, learners were satisfied with the LMS. The majority of learners *strongly agree* or *agree* with the evaluation criteria (Figure 2).
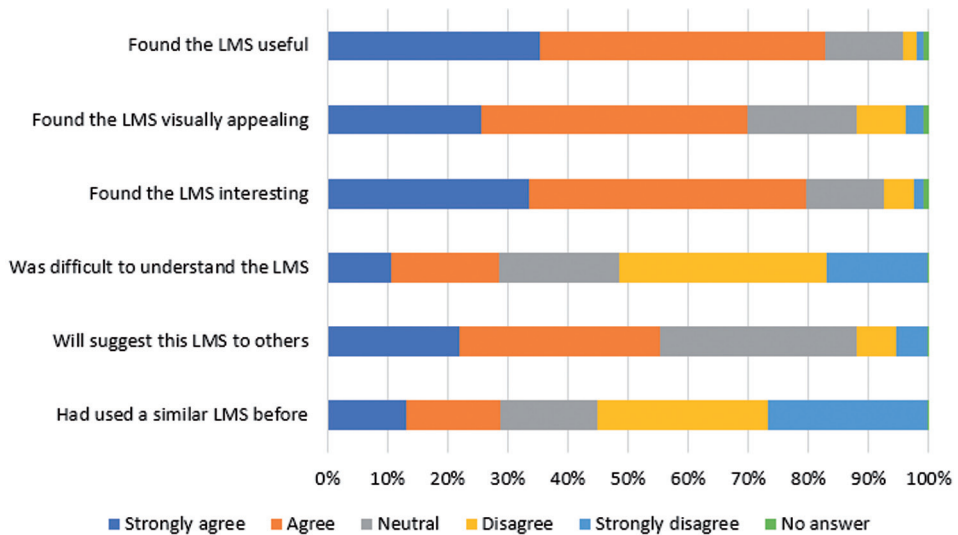

Figure 2. Evaluation of the LMS by all learners, %

S o u r c e: Own work

528 learners (82.76%) found the LMS useful, 446 (69.91%) found it visually appealing and 508 (79.62%) – interesting. 326 learners (51.09%) admitted that it was not difficult to understand how the LMS works, and 128 learners (20.06%) were neutral. However, 182 learners (28.53%) experienced problems in using the LMS. 353 learners (55.33%) would suggest it to other learners and 208 (32.6%) were neutral. Thus, it may be concluded that overall, the given LMS has the characteristics required for a user-friendly LMS (Roman & Plopeanu, 2020), but certain groups of learners require more assistance during studies.

Next, the results of each individual country are presented.

Croatian respondents positively evaluated the LMS (M = 3.3133–3.9036). As the majority had not used a similar LMS before (M = 2.8916), they found the LMS a bit complicated (M = 2.7952), but, nevertheless, useful (M = 3.9036), visually appealing (M = 3.5783), interesting (M = 3.6145), and they would suggest it to other learners (M = 3.3133). Other research conducted in Croatia on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Puljak et al., 2020) indicated that learners had sufficient IT skills to participate in online learning independently (84.7%) and they had technological possibilities as well. As Divjak (2020) explains, Croatia particularly focused on developing students' and teachers' digital skills in their curricular reform of education in 2016-2017 which was extremely beneficial during the pandemic period both for teachers and students, including adult learners.

Although Czech learners had not used a similar LMS before (M = 2.2897), they evaluated it very positively (M = 3.3458-4.4486). They found the LMS useful (M = 4.3458), interesting (M = 4.4486), visually appealing (M = 3.9346), and it did not take them too much time to understand how it works. They were inclined to suggest it to other learners as well (M = 3.9252). Prior research (Bobáková & Chylková, 2021) on Czech adult learners' digital skills shows a steady increase during the last decade resulting in 27% of adult learners being able to master 5–6 digital skills in 2017. It is evident that learners were not complete beginners and could easily grasp new knowledge.

Although most of Latvian respondents had not used a similar LMS before (M = 2.8378), 51 learners (45.95%) learnt its operation fast. However, at the same time 29 learners (26.13%) experienced problems with the LMS. Learners found the LMS interesting (M = 4.0721), useful (M = 3.9640), and visually appealing (M = 3.8649). These results were opposite to results of other studies conducted in Latvia. Rimkuviené et al. (2021) found that 62.0% of Latvian students reported problems with the LMS. They even recommended improvements to the interface of the Moodle system used. Furthermore, Trinkūnienė & Juškaite (2021) reported that 36.84% of Latvian and Lithuanian learners had insufficient digital skills.

72 Polish learners (59.02%) had not used a similar LMS before (M = 2.4836), which impacted their overall result. Although 58 learners (47.54%) found it difficult to understand how to use the LMS, they found it useful (M = 3.8852), visually appealing (M = 3.2787), and interesting (M = 3.5). However, they were neutral as

to suggesting the learning platform to other learners (M = 3.0246). The findings of a research conducted in Poland by Tomczyk (2021) also indicate that 1/3 of respondents reported difficulties in using the Moodle LMS. This emphasizes the necessity of having workshops introducing the LMS prior to course implementation. However, it has to be added that a part of Polish learners were learners requiring special educational treatment, which impacted this result.

Although only 43 learners (38.74%) from Romania *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they had used a similar LMS before, they could understand how to use it quite fast (M = 2.4775). Overall, they positively evaluated the LMS (M = 4.0270–4.3964), acknowledging its usefulness (M =4 .3964) and indicating that it was interesting (M = 4.3694), visually appealing (M = 4.0270) and they would suggest it to other learners (M = 4). On the contrary, other studies in Romania (Ştefenel & Neagoş, 2020; Edu et al., 2021), indicated a low evaluation of learners' digital skills and LMS used as it overburdened students with work. Consequently, the learning outcomes were not achieved. Although the use of BL in teaching/learning was technologically feasible, it was not widely used in Romania prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Slovenian respondents gave a very positive evaluation of the LMS (M = 4.0577–4.1538). Respondents found the platform useful (M = 4.1538), interesting (M = 4.1058), visually appealing (M = 4.0577) and they would suggest it to other learners (M = 3.6923). Although learners had not used a similar platform before (M = 2.2596), answers to the opposite question – *it did not take them too long to understand the LMS*, were positive (Mean = 2.3846). Overall, Slovenia was much more prepared for online education than other countries. According to Motoh (2020), state support for distance learning was stable, including support provided to vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities and the less educated, who were one of the target groups of Slovenia.

Despite an overall positive evaluation of the LMS by learners of all countries, differences among respondents were discovered when the learner responses were compared with the average result. The LMS evaluation in Figure 3 is the average of three variables: *I found the LMS useful*, *I found the LMS interesting*, and *I found the LMS visually appealing*. User friendliness is reflected by the opposite question – *It took me too long to understand how the LMS works,* and therefore data for this variable has been reversed so that positive answers have a higher value.
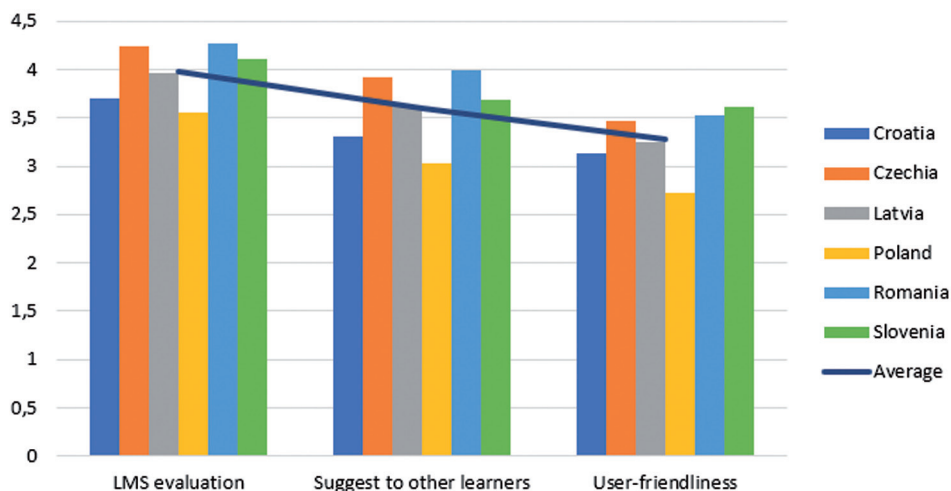
Figure 3. Evaluation of the LMS by respondents' country, means (max = 5).

Source: Own work

The Kruskal Wallis test indicated significant differences among the countries. Learners from Romania found the LMS significantly more useful and visually more appealing than learners from other countries, and they would more likely suggest the given LMS to other learners. This may be explained by the fact that a great majority of Romanian learners (68.47%) were students. Czech learners found the LMS more interesting than other learners. The learners' occupational status impacted this result. 57.94% of Czech learners were employed compared to 25.22–50.45% of learners from other countries. Employees found the LMS more interesting than other groups of learners. At the same time, they had not used a similar learning platform before, which could have influenced this result as well. In turn, Slovenian learners were more technically savvy and needed less time to understand platform navigation. This may be explained by the fact that the Slovenian target group comprised 44 students, including 20 IT students. Furthermore, significant differences were observed in terms of learners' education. Overall, the higher the learners' education level, the more positively they evaluated the LMS.

Comparing the data concerning learners with cultural, social, geographic and economic barriers to learning and senior learners requiring special educational treatment with regular adult learners, it is evident that learners with barriers to learning found the LMS more interesting than regular adult learners (Table 2).

Table 2

Evaluation of the LMS by respondents' category, means (max = 5)

Evaluation of the LMS	Respondents' category		
	Learners with barriers to learning	Regular learners	All learners together
Found the LMS useful	4.0335	4.1492	4.1113
Found the LMS visually appealing	3.7656	3.7972	3.7868
Found the LMS interesting	4.0622	4.0047	4.0235
Was difficult to understand the LMS	3.0766	2.5221	2.7038
Will suggest this LMS to others	3.4258	3.6783	3.5956
Had used a similar LMS before	2.2584	2.7599	2.5956

S o u r c e: Own work

Although the data seem quite similar, the Kruskal Wallis test applied shows significant differences among these groups in all aspects. Therefore, the data was further analysed in-depth considering each group of learners with barriers to learning to evaluate the suitability of the LMS to all target groups (Figure 4).
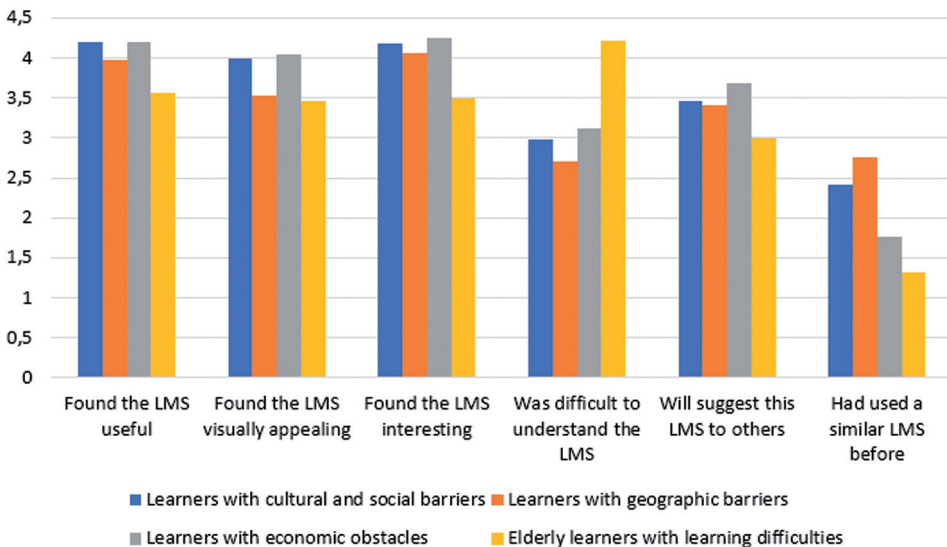

Figure 4. Evaluation of the LMS by learners with barriers to learning, means (max = 5)

S o u r c e: Own work

Learners with barriers to learning found the LMS significantly more interesting (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed = 0.000) than other adult learners. Among them, the highest evaluation was given by learners with economic, cultural and social barriers, and geographic barriers to learning.

The findings show that learners requiring special educational treatment needed significantly much more time to understand how the LMS works (Mean Rank = 512.93). This may be explained by the fact that very few of them had used a similar LMS before (Mean Rank = 140.43). They were also less willing to suggest the given LMS to other learners (Mean Rank = 236.07). The other group with low previous experience in using any LMS before was learners with economic obstacles (Mean Rank = 199.65), but, contrary to senior learners, they would suggest the LMS to other learners (Mean Rank = 342.48).

Thus, it may be concluded that the LMS under analysis is suitable both to learners with certain barriers to learning and regular adult learners for non-formal and informal learning as well. Since, elderly learners requiring special educational treatment need additional support, the LMS will not be suitable for them for informal learning.

Discussion

The target BL course was implemented both as a non-formal education course and for informal learning as well. First, learners were selected based on special requirements, as indicated in the sample description above. Next, where possible, learners were divided into groups. Prior to course implementation, face-to-face or online workshops were organised for learner groups to demonstrate the LMS. However, part of the course participants were individual learners who were studying the course as informal learning. These individual learners were reached by e-mails, skype, WhatsApp and through personal visits or other personal contacts to explain the LMS before they started studying.

When, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face meetings were restricted, novel ways had to be found to implement the target BL course. Thus, the face-to-face stage was implemented on other virtual platforms, such as MS Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, Cisco WebEx, etc. This made the learning process even more complicated as learners had to learn two learning platforms – Moodle for the online stage and the other virtual platform for the face-to-face stage. Slovenia was the only country where the course was implemented in the traditional BL format with real face-to-face sessions in class. The face-to-face stage in Croatia, Czechia, and Latvia was implemented partly in class and partly on virtual platforms, depending on the situation in the country. However, participation in face-to-face sessions in class was

quite limited even during periods when it was allowed, since people were afraid of assembling together. In Poland and Romania, the course was implemented as an online-only BL course. Thus, it was extremely challenging for teachers to explain to learners how the LMS works via online meetings, since many learners with barriers to learning also lacked digital skills. This had an impact on the research results. Other challenges concerned the course monitoring. Furthermore, when implementing the course solely online, the learning speed is slower as learner-learner and learner-teacher interaction takes more time using various platforms, and it is essential to consider the time devoted to each task.

Despite these above-mentioned challenges, learners showed interest in the target BL course. They were satisfied with the LMS created, and in some cases even suggested improvements to it.

Previous studies also highlight students' interest in improving the LMS. For example, Czech learners suggested 'including a combination of online presentations, exercises, videos, and interactive activities into online language teaching to make foreign language learning more stimulating' (Klimova, 2021, p.1792). The results of the current research are similar to this prior research.

Students also desired to do more group work and games that would ensure more interactivity in lessons. This leads to a conclusion that the course in a Moodle environment must be well structured and the tasks should be more engaging. This finding is in line with the results of a study by Rimkuviené et al. (2021).

The results are closely related with the readiness of the country to online learning in terms of teachers' and learners' digital skills and their previous experience in using different LMS. Although there are certain similarities among the countries, learners' digital competence level varies a lot. For example, 'in Slovenia, 80% of teachers "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that most teachers in the school were open to change' (OECD, 2020a, p.3) and their technological capacity was above the OECD average (ibid, p.5). In turn, the analysis of the situation in Poland, which showed the lowest results in evaluating the LMS, reveals that 'the access to the necessary digital devices is not equally distributed across the population' (OECD, 2020b, p.4), and it resulted in technical problems in online learning during the pandemic (Gorecka et al., 2021). Furthermore, as Olszewska (2020) argues, the negative evaluation of online learning may be attributed to psychological not technological barriers. In this case the results showed that face-to-face contacts would have helped learners with learning difficulties to understand technical nuances better.

Conclusion

The article presented the main findings of a research conducted in six European countries – Croatia, Czechia, Latvia, Poland, Slovenia, and Romania. It introduced readers to a culture-based multilingual BL course created to develop adult learners' 21st century skills implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional face-to-face learning was restricted, and other alternatives were applied in this 'new normal' situation. This article analysed the learners' evaluation of the LMS.

The results show that learners were satisfied with the LMS created. Most of them admitted that although they had not used a similar LMS before, they could understand how to manage it quite easily. However, senior and technically less experienced learners required more help, and it would have been beneficial for them if they had had more face-to-face assistance during the learning period.

The results indicated that the level of learners' digital skills, education, occupation and previous learning experience impacted their overall satisfaction with the LMS. It may be concluded that despite differences between these countries, the target BL course may be applied to regular adult learners both for non-formal and informal learning. As regards to learners with barriers to learning, the course is suitable for learners with cultural, social, and geographic barriers, and may be used both for non-formal and informal education as the learners could cope with the LMS. Some learners with economic obstacles may succeed in learning in an informal way, but some experienced technical problems with the LMS. It is suggested to involve learners requiring special educational treatment in traditional non-formal learning instead of the BL format.

To conclude, the given BL format with the face-to-face stage conducted online (online-only BL course) requires special pedagogical approaches and very clear step-by-step instructions, and significant input from teachers and learners to attain the learning outcomes.

Limitations of Research and Implications for Future Research

The target course was designed in 2019 and was delivered to adult learners during the COVID-19 period. Since restrictions for face-to-face meetings were in force in the partner countries, it influenced the course delivery mode and results. The course was predominantly implemented as an online-only BL course, except for Slovenia, which was the only country where the course was implemented in the traditional BL format. The research results show the course implementation and evaluation in a specific situation. In the future, it will be useful to conduct similar

research in a traditional situation and elaborate guidelines for the course organisers to deliver a BL course to adult learners with certain barriers to learning to involve them in lifelong learning.

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Implementation of a Multilingual Blended Learning Course for Non-formal and Informal Adult Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional face-to-face learning was replaced by distance education, e-learning, online learning and blended learning at all education levels, including adult education. Learning Management Systems (LMS) are crucial in organising an efficient pedagogical process online and ensuring that learners attain learning outcomes. The current research, conducted in six EU countries – Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and Czechia, evaluates the suitability of the LMS to non-formal and informal adult learning for various target groups when face-to-face adult education was restricted. The research involved 638 participants, 209 of them were learners with barriers to learning. The participants studied the blended learning course created for non-formal and informal adult learning and filled in a feedback questionnaire after its acquisition. The results indicate overall learner satisfaction with the LMS and the course delivery, and the suitability of the LMS for regular adult learners and learners with cultural, social, and geographic barriers to learning both for non-formal and informal learning. The LMS is suitable for learners with economic obstacles for non-formal learning. However, learners with learning difficulties require special pedagogical approaches to support them to acquire the course in an online-only blended learning format.

K e y w o r d s : b l e nded learning, Learning Management System (LMS), adult learners, learners with barriers, non-formal education, informal learning

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Wdrożenie wielojęzycznego kursu blended learning dla pozaformalnego i nieformalnego uczenia się dorosłych podczas pandemii COVID-19

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W związku z pandemią COVID-19 tradycyjne nauczanie twarzą w twarz zostało zastąpione edukacją na odległość, e-learningiem, nauką online i edukacją mieszaną na wszystkich poziomach, w tym w nauczaniu dorosłych. Learning Management Systems (LMS) mają kluczowe znaczenie dla organizowania skutecznego procesu edukacyjnego online i zapewniania, że uczący się osiągają zakładane efekty uczenia się. Obecne badania, przeprowadzone w sześciu krajach UE: Chorwacji, Łotwie, Słowenii, Rumunii, Polsce i Czechach, określają przydatność platform LMS do pozaformalnego i nieformalnego uczenia się dorosłych w przypadku różnych grup docelowych, w sytuacji gdy kształcenie dorosłych w bezpośrednim kontakcie jest ograniczone. W badaniach wzięło udział 638 uczestników, w tym 209 osób z trudnościami w dostępie do nauki. Uczestnicy przestudiowali przygotowany kurs typu blended learning jako kurs edukacji pozaformalnej i nieformalnej oraz wypełnili ankietę ewaluacyjną po przyswojeniu treści kursu. Wyniki wskazują na ogólne zadowolenie uczących się z LMS i ze sposobu prowadzenia kursu oraz przydatności platform LMS dla potrzeb standardowych uczniów dorosłych oraz uczniów z kulturowymi, społecznymi i geograficznymi przeszkodami w uczeniu się zarówno w przypadku uczenia się pozaformalnego, jak i nieformalnego. LMS są odpowiednie dla uczniów z trudnościami ekonomicznymi w uczeniu się pozaformalnym, ale uczniowie z barierami w nauce wymagają specjalnego podejścia pedagogicznego, aby wesprzeć ich w przyswajaniu treści kursu w formacie nauczania mieszanego wyłącznie online.

S ł o w a k l u c z o w e: blended learning, Learning Management System (LMS), dorośli uczniowie, uczniowie ze specjalnymi potrzebami, edukacja pozaformalna, uczenie nieforrmalne

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Implementación de un Curso de Aprendizaje Combinado Multilingüe para el Aprendizaje No formal e Informal de Adultos durante la Pandemia del COVID-19

R e s u m e n

Debido a la pandemia del COVID-19, el aprendizaje tradicional presencial fue reemplazado por la educación a distancia, formación a distancia, aprendizaje en línea y aprendizaje combinado en todos los niveles educativos, incluido la educación de adultos. El Sistema de Gestión de Aprendizaje (LMS en sus siglas inglesas) tiene una enorme importancia por la organización eficiente del proceso pedagógico en línea, así como la garantía por parte de los estudiantes de conseguir los resultados del aprendizaje. La investigación actual llevada a cabo en seis países de la Unión Europea: Croacia, Letonia, Eslovenia, Rumanía, Polonia y República Checa, evalúa la idoneidad del Sistema de Gestión del Aprendizaje (LMS) respecto al aprendizaje de adultos no formal e informal para varios grupos destinatarios, cuando la educación de adultos presencial está restringida. La investigación comprendió 638 participantes, 209 de ellos son estudiantes con ciertos obstáculos en el aprendizaje. Los participantes estudiaron el curso denominado aprendizaje combinado, como un curso no formal e

informal y un cuestionario de opiniones cumplimentado al término del curso. Los resultados indican la satisfacción total de los estudiantes con el LMS y la impartición del curso y la idoneidad del Sistema de Gestión del Aprendizaje para alumnos adultos comunes y alumnos con obstáculos culturales, sociales y geográficos en el aprendizaje no formal e informal. El LMS es apropiado para alumnos con dificultades económicas para el aprendizaje no formal, pero los alumnos con ciertos problemas en el aprendizaje requieren un enfoque pedagógico especial para ayudarles en la consecución del curso en un formato de aprendizaje combinado exclusivamente en línea.

T é r m i n o s c l a v e s: aprendizaje combinado, Sistema de Gestión del Aprendizaje (LMS siglas en inglés), alumnos adultos, alumnos con barreras en el aprendizaje, educación no formal (educación no reglada), aprendizaje informal

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Реализация многоязыкового курса смешанного типа обучения в области неформального образования и информального обучения для взрослых во время пандемии COVID-19

А н н о т а ц и я

В результате пандемии COVID-19 традиционное очное обучение было заменено дистанционным образованием, электронным обучением, онлайн обучением и смешанным обучением на всех уровнях образования, включая дополнительное образование для взрослых. Системы управления обучением (СУО, Learning Management Systems (LMS) крайне важны для организации эффективного педагогического процесса дистанционно и для обеспечения необходимых результатов у обучающихся. Данное исследование, которое проводилось в шести странах ЕС: Хорватия, Латвия, Словения, Румыния, Польша, Чехия, оценивает, насколько системы управления обучением подходят для неформального и информального обучению взрослых разных целевых групп в условиях, когда очное образование для взрослых ограничено. В исследовании приняло участие 638 человек, 209 из которых являются обучающимися с определёнными препятствиями в учебе. Участники прошли разработанный в рамках исследования курс смешанного обучения в виде неформального и информального обучения и по окончанию курса заполнили анкету обратной связи. Результаты исследования показывают общее удовлетворение участников системой управления обучения и тем, как преподавался курс. Исследование показало также соответствие системы СУО для типовых взрослых учащихся и для учащихся с разными сложностями (культурные, социальные и географические) используя как неформальный, так и информальный типы обучения. Система СУО подходит для обучающихся с экономическими сложностями в неформальном обучении, тогда как для работы с учащимися с другими сложностями в обучении необходимы особые педагогические подходы для преподавания курса только дистанционно с использованием смешанного типа обучения.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: смешанное обучение, система управления обучением (СУО), взрослые обучающиеся, учащиеся с определенными осложнениями, неформальное и информальное обучение

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