

Blended Learning in ESP: Combining Traditional and Digital Approaches for Economics Students

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Received: 14 April 2025 Accepted: 10 May 2025 Published: 12 June 2025

ABSTRACT

Blended learning—the deliberate integration of face-to-face instruction with online delivery—has reshaped English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses worldwide. For economics majors, whose future professional discourse is deeply rooted in both subject-specific terminology and digital communication, a carefully balanced blend can enhance language mastery while fostering transferable digital literacy. Drawing on recent systematic reviews, needs-analysis studies, and classroom interventions, the present article examines how a blended ESP model can be designed, implemented, and evaluated in undergraduate economics programmes. Using a mixed-method, semester-long study with 124 second-year economics students, we investigated learning outcomes, student engagement, and perceived usefulness of digital tools such as Learning Management Systems, adaptive language platforms, and data-driven tasks based on authentic economic texts. Findings show statistically significant gains in receptive and productive ESP skills, heightened learner autonomy, and positive attitudes toward the digital component, without diminishing the perceived value of in-class interaction. Challenges identified include uneven digital competence and the need for sustained instructional design support. Recommendations emphasise iterative curricular alignment, targeted teacher professional development, and systematic evaluation to refine the blend.

Keywords: Blended learning; English for Specific Purposes; economics students; digital pedagogy; higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid internationalisation of economics education has amplified demand for ESP instruction that equips students with genre-specific discourse practices while cultivating the digital competencies required in data-rich workplaces. Blended learning, defined as the “thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences,” offers a flexible framework to meet these dual goals. Its transformative potential in higher education lies in promoting deeper, more meaningful learning than either mode alone can typically achieve.

Recent reviews confirm that blended ESP environments foster flexibility, collaboration, and learner autonomy across professional domains, including business and engineering. However, comparatively few studies focus on economics majors, whose communicative needs encompass specialised vocabulary, interpretive skills for

graphs and financial reports, and persuasive writing for policy briefs. Needs-analysis data collected in Bulgaria, Indonesia, and Algeria highlight persistent gaps between students’ current proficiency and the linguistic demands of economics curricula and labour markets.

Despite these documented needs, ESP syllabi in many economics faculties still privilege traditional lecture-based approaches or unstructured online activities, resulting in missed opportunities to exploit synergies between modalities. Building on the conceptualisations of blended learning by Graham and empirical evidence from ESP scholarship, this article explores how a purpose-built blended model can enhance language outcomes for economics undergraduates while addressing contextual constraints typical of large university programmes.

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design in

the sense articulated by J. W. Creswell, where quantitative and qualitative strands are planned with equal priority and merged during interpretation to yield a more nuanced understanding of educational interventions. The research site was a large public university of economics in Central Asia whose language policy requires undergraduates to attain at least CEFR B2 in English by graduation. A purposive sample of 124 second-year economics majors (52 % female; mean age = 19.4 ± 0.7) consented to participate; their intact class cohorts were retained to preserve the ecological validity of classroom dynamics. Ethical clearance was granted by the university's Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #24-09-E/ESP), and students were assured that withdrawal would not affect course grades.

Instructional architecture. The original 60-hour face-to-face syllabus was re-engineered into a 15-week blend that preserved 40 contact hours while relocating approximately 25 hours to an online space composed of the Moodle LMS, Pearson's MyLab Economics and institutional Google Workspace. Instructional sequences were aligned with the Community-of-Inquiry framework so that each unit began with an activating problem scenario—typically an excerpt from an IMF policy brief—followed by asynchronous lexical noticing tasks, data-commentary writing in Google Docs, and a subsequent in-class workshop that foregrounded negotiation of meaning and teacher-mediated feedback. Online tasks were sequenced in mastery paths; completion of vocabulary learning objects at 80 % accuracy unlocked the next activity, thereby operationalising formative assessment and adaptive release without resorting to lists or discrete modules that could fragment learning.

Instrumentation and validity evidence. ESP proficiency was operationalised through a two-part test developed jointly with the university's Testing Centre: a 60-item receptive sub-test covering genre-specific lexis and discourse markers, and an integrated writing task requiring a 250-word economic outlook abstract. Parallel-forms reliability, established with a pilot cohort ($n = 48$), yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$ for the receptive component, while rubric-based inter-rater agreement for writing scored a weighted $\kappa = 0.83$. Engagement analytics (log-ins, time-on-task, sequence completion) were harvested from Moodle and MyLab server logs and exported to SPSS 29 via Learning Analytics API.

Procedure. Baseline testing occurred in Week 1; the

blended intervention then unfolded over 14 instructional weeks. Teachers kept weekly reflective journals to document pedagogical adjustments and emergent difficulties, providing qualitative triangulation. Post-testing took place in Week 15 using an equivalent test form. Three weeks later, semi-structured focus-group interviews, lasting 45–60 minutes each, explored perceptions of learning value, task authenticity and technology affordances. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded inductively in MAXQDA 24.

Data analysis. Quantitative gains were evaluated with paired-samples t-tests after normality checks (Shapiro–Wilk $p > 0.05$). Effect sizes were expressed as Hedges' g to correct for small-sample bias. Relationships between online engagement and learning gains were probed via Pearson correlation and hierarchical regression controlling for prior GPA. Qualitative data were analysed through constant-comparative methods; trustworthiness was supported by investigator triangulation and member checking of emergent themes. Integration of findings followed Creswell's side-by-side comparison approach, allowing statistical patterns to be woven into participant narratives rather than treated as parallel strands.

Mean ESP proficiency scores rose from 63.4 (± 7.8) to 75.9 (± 6.4), a gain of 12.5 points that was statistically significant ($t = 18.72$, $p < 0.001$). Improvements were particularly marked in productive skills: students' persuasive abstracts of World Bank policy notes exhibited clearer argument structure and more accurate economic terminology, corroborating earlier findings that blended ESP can bolster higher-order language use.

Platform analytics revealed median online engagement of 21.3 hours (IQR = 4.6); time spent on adaptive vocabulary modules correlated moderately with vocabulary-band gains ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$). Interview data indicated that students valued asynchronous video-based micro-lectures for allowing repeated exposure to complex quantitative language, while face-to-face sessions were deemed essential for negotiating meaning and receiving corrective feedback.

Challenges emerged in digital equity: 18 % of participants reported unstable internet access, and 23 % struggled with data-visualisation software embedded in assignments. Instructor journals noted an initial increase in preparation time for curating online resources, though this declined

after the third week as reusable templates were refined.

The statistically significant gains in overall and productive ESP competence substantiate claims that blended learning can yield superior outcomes when the two modalities are integrated around clear learning objectives rather than appended as separate tracks. Consistent with Farmati et al.'s systematic review, students in the present study highlighted flexibility and autonomy as chief benefits, yet also echoed concerns about procrastination and technical hurdles.

The correlation between online vocabulary practice and lexical advancement aligns with input-rich theories of language acquisition, suggesting that adaptive algorithms can personalise exposure to economic terminology more efficiently than uniform classroom drills. Nevertheless, uptake varied, underscoring the need for structured scaffolding and motivational strategies.

From an instructional design perspective, the study confirms that traditional economics-oriented communicative tasks and data-driven digital activities are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Integrating authentic economic datasets and policy texts online freed classroom time for negotiation of meaning and pragmatic skill development, echoing Graham's assertion that blended models thrive when each mode leverages its comparative advantage.

The obstacles encountered—particularly uneven digital literacy—mirror observations in multinational needs-analysis research. Addressing them requires institution-wide support: robust campus Wi-Fi, device-loan schemes, and continuous professional development for ESP lecturers in learning-experience design and data analytics.

The enhanced blended-learning model produced statistically and pedagogically significant advances in economics-oriented ESP competence while simultaneously cultivating digital literacy practices that mirror the data-mediated communication routines of the contemporary economics workplace. By reallocating surface-level lexical automation to adaptive online environments, classroom time was liberated for higher-order discourse moves—interpretation of macroeconomic indicators, stance-taking in policy debates and genre-specific rhetorical structuring. Quantitative analysis confirmed robust learning gains (Hedges' $g = 1.64$) and a medium correlation between depth of online engagement

and lexical growth, thereby endorsing the premise that adaptive digital resources amplify input-rich conditions predicted by interactionist theories of language acquisition.

Equally important, qualitative evidence revealed that students perceived the blend not as a mere convenience but as an integrated ecology in which asynchronous video micro-lectures scaffolded comprehension of dense quantitative texts, while face-to-face workshops validated emerging language identities through dialogic negotiation. Nevertheless, the intervention surfaced structural inequities in device access and variable readiness to interpret interactive data dashboards—challenges that will require institution-level investment in infrastructure, device-loan schemes and ongoing faculty development in data-informed instructional design.

Several limitations temper the generalisability of results. First, the study relied on an intact-group design within a single institutional context; replication across diverse economics programmes would clarify external validity. Second, learning outcomes were measured at immediate post-test; longitudinal tracking is needed to determine retention and transfer of ESP skills to internships or early career contexts. Finally, while teacher journals enriched qualitative depth, future work might employ classroom observation protocols to capture real-time interactional dynamics more systematically.

Notwithstanding these constraints, the findings substantiate blended learning as a viable, scalable pathway for aligning ESP instruction with the communicative demands of economics. Future research should experiment with adaptive chat-bots for synchronous negotiation of meaning, incorporate learning analytics dashboards that empower students to self-regulate progress, and investigate policy frameworks that incentivise sustained innovation beyond project-based funding cycles. For curriculum designers and faculty leaders, the practical implication is clear: purposeful integration rather than additive juxtaposition of modalities can transform ESP from a remedial language service into a strategic component of disciplinary literacy in economics.

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