A Blended Learning Approach to Academic Writing and Presentation Skills

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Abstract
Blended learning is a common learning mode in higher education which combines the use of online and face-to-face classroom learning. The use of blended learning for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) with non-native university students, however, can pose challenges from the methods and materials to the student perceptions. This article describes the blended learning implementation of an EAP course for academic writing and presentation skills and how the students perceived the blended course mode, methods, workload, learning atmosphere and challenges. Results indicate that non-native university students appreciated blended learning for the EAP course and found the flexibility and convenience of blended learning beneficial to their EAP learning. This encourages the further development of blended learning options for EAP writing and presentation skills as students no longer require the extensive classroom teaching context but instead adapt well to self-regulated and reflective learning of EAP.

Keywords
blended learning, academic writing, academic presentations, course feedback

Introduction
Blended learning is a pedagogical model which combines face-to-face classroom teaching with the innovative use of information and communication technology and online learning experiences (Gaebel, Kupriyanova, Morais & Colucci, 2014; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Graham, 2006). Blended learning is considered a versatile way to introduce new elements of online media into a course while still recognising the merits of face-to-face contact so that this mixture or ‘blend’ combines the best of both worlds. Also in the teaching and learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for
Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education, the traditional classroom teaching has expanded to include various levels of blending as language learning can be seen to benefit from a thoughtful integration of both classroom learning and online learning, with the strengths of both blended into a unique and effective learning experience (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Glazer, 2011; Lim & Morris, 2009; MacDonald, 2008; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014).

For teachers and instructors of EAP in higher education, blended learning can thus enhance pedagogical richness through various educational possibilities in creating the best mixture of onsite and online learning for each course and set of learning outcomes (Mortera-Gutiérrez, 2006; Stein & Graham, 2014). In higher education in general, rationales for blended learning have been argued to include supporting flexibility and diversity, enhancing the learning experience, engaging students outside the classroom as well as increased efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Graham, Allen & Ure, 2005; Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts & Francis, 2006).

These elements are particularly poignant when teaching EAP for non-native speakers of English at university level such as in Finland, where ESP and EAP courses are a required part of the university Bachelor’s degree in most degree programmes. Finnish students whose degree of 180 ECTS credits may include 4-10 ECTS credits of ESP and EAP studies, may often seek the most effective and flexible manner of completing the studies while still obtaining valuable knowledge, learning and practice for their studies and future professional lives. Therefore, blended learning arguably lends itself well to the practice of academic and field-specific language and communication skills as it allows for flexibility and convenience through the online components while retaining the benefits of the classroom communicative and interactive face-to-face experience that may not lend itself to online delivery.

Therefore, one of the main benefits of blended learning particularly from an advanced EAP language learning perspective is the implementation of classroom learning instead of relying solely on an online learning environment. After all, online learning has been criticised for the lack of physical presence which can complicate the cognitive, meta-cognitive and social learning, particularly in discussion and other oral communication situations (Francescato, Porcelli, Mebane, Cuddetta, Klobas & Renzi, 2006). Previous studies have also showed that students value the classroom teaching context i.e. face-to-face time, which can be vital in engaging students in a sense of community (Conole, de Laat, Dillon & Darby, 2008; Edginton & Holbrook, 2010).

In essence, even though young adults today are primarily considered digital natives, learning through online environments or blended learning may still generate difficulties (Lernstrup, 2013). From a faculty perspective, the largest causes for concern with blended learning courses have been the unsuitability with students who need individual attention or who are not competent with computer use (Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014), or otherwise have time management issues or struggle with personal organisation skills.
(Edginton & Holbrook, 2010). It has also been established that not all students enjoy studying in online environments, particularly exclusively (MacDonald, 2008), and that university students have been found to consciously avoid blended learning courses (Riley, Gardner, Cosgrove, Olitsky, O’Neil & Du, 2014). Hence, while blended learning offers students flexibility, it also requires discipline, time management skills and comfort with technology (Napier, Dekhane & Smith, 2011).

The premise for this study lies on Ginns and Ellis (2007) who have encouraged higher education instructors with blended learning courses to not only focus on the technical possibilities and functions of the online materials and activities but also to seek to understand the students’ perceptions of the learning in blended learning environments. Against this background, the purpose of this study was to examine student responses and perceptions of studying EAP writing and presentations skills in a blended learning course. The students in this study were Finnish university students of Business and Economics at the University of Eastern Finland (UEF). A course included in their Bachelor’s degree, English Academic Writing and Presentations (3 ECTS, CEFR level C1) has been organised as a blended learning course since the spring semester of 2013.

With student feedback collected in spring 2014 and autumn 2015, the aim was to determine how the Finnish students as non-native speakers of English perceived the blended learning environment, methods, materials and workload of an EAP course with an arguably challenging target of practicing and developing formal academic writing and academic presentation skills. Another element of interest in exploring student perceptions on this blended learning course was that the impetus to arrange the course as blended learning had not come from the students themselves but from their department, the UEF Business School, for the main rationale of reducing required classroom hours for students often unable to attend classes because of work or living elsewhere and studying as distance learning students. Therefore, an added element was to gauge how the students themselves viewed the blended learning of EAP writing and presentations and whether some would have preferred a classroom teaching course if given the choice.

**EAP in Finnish Universities**

Within the context of this study, EAP is inherently connected to Finnish university studies. Since the mid-1970s all higher education degrees in Finnish science universities have included compulsory language and communication requirements (Karjalainen & Laulajainen, 2011; Tuomi & Rontu, 2011). According to the Finnish government decree on university degrees, in addition to demonstrated proficiency in domestic languages Finnish and Swedish, all students must also attain skills in at least one foreign language that enable them to “follow developments in the field and to operate in an international work environment” (794/2004, Ch. 1, Sec. 6). The purpose is to prepare students for the
concrete application of field-specific, professional and academic language skills in their studies, future working lives and in the development of their academic expertise. The vast majority of Finnish university students elect English as the foreign language as this is a continuation of their first foreign language from comprehensive school.

The background of English from secondary and upper secondary school levels and the overall positive attitudes towards English in Finnish society (Leppänen & Nikula, 2007) also facilitate the efficient teaching and development of EAP at university level, typically provided by the university language centres. As a result of the Bologna Process and the principles of lifelong learning, language centres have increasingly moved to promote self-directed language learning (Räsänen, 2008) and adopted new pedagogical technology and learning environments to support the changing student population and the versatile needs and backgrounds. This has also paved the way for increased online and blended learning options for various ESP and EAP courses.

As EAP courses at Finnish universities aim at developing students’ skills in academic and subject-specific reading, writing, oral and communicative proficiency, learning outcomes for courses typically include elements such as academic text comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, oral fluency and presentation skills, all specified to focus solely on the needs of the learners in their field (cf. Flowerdew, 2013; Huhta, Vogt, Johansson & Tulkki, 2013). EAP courses hence are intended to enable students to proceed efficiently with their studies where much of the course literature, lecture notes, current research and even teaching may be in English, and to prepare them for the future demands presented by modern working lives. Every year in course feedback Finnish university students show their appreciation for the EAP courses they attend, finding them relevant, meaningful and enjoyable.

**Teaching EAP through blended learning for Business and Economics students**

The most common ESP courses taught in European higher education institutions are related to Business English or English for business purposes (Räisänen & Fortanet-Gómez, 2008; Saarinen, 2014), also the specific focus area in this study. At the UEF Business School students working towards their Bachelor’s degree in Business and Economics must complete three English language and communication courses provided by the UEF Language Centre: *English for Business and Economics* (3 ECTS, recommended for the first year of studies), *English for Communicating in Business* (4 ECTS, recommended for the second year), and *English Academic Writing and Presentations* (3 ECTS, recommended for the end of the Bachelor’s degree). The courses vary in length, workload, activities, content and learning outcomes and offer any business student at UEF a comprehensive opportunity to develop his/her field-specific, professional and academic English language and communication skills.

In 2012, a request was made by the UEF Business School that the last of these courses, *English Academic Writing and Presentations*, was to be conducted as a blended...
The request may have been influenced by the prevalent use of e-learning for studies in business and management in European higher education (Gaebel et al., 2014), however the primary rationale provided was that many students found the 80% required attendance in the regular classroom teaching of 36 total hours challenging because of work commitments or studying as a distance student. In fact, a common motive for adopting existing courses to blended learning has been the location of the students, i.e. studying at a distance from the institution or otherwise unable to attend classes on campus (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). The University of Eastern Finland also has the most distance learning students of all Finnish universities at 20%, with the national average being 11% (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014), this was arguably a valid cause for concern expressed by the students’ department.

The EAP blended learning course was then designed to accommodate the needs of students who were geographically dispersed and/or had conflicting schedules (cf. Pituch & Lee, 2006). However, the course was made exclusively blended learning without providing the students an option between classroom teaching for those who may have preferred more face-to-face contact and practice throughout the course, or blended learning for those with scheduling restrictions or other preference to online studying. Therefore, initially concern was raised about students’ reaction to the blended learning approach since students in blended learning are required to be independent and self-regulated learners with good time management skills and comfort with using information technology (Ellis & Goodyear, 2010; Napier, Dekhane & Smith, 2011). However, previous research on Finnish university students’ learning has indicated that many students are in fact self-directed (Heikkilä, Niemivirta, Nieminen & Lonka, 2011), so this juxtaposition generated an interest to examine the student perceptions more closely.

Course Design

According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008), successful implementation of blended learning requires an understanding of versatile learning environments, communication characteristics, and the requirements of various disciplines and resources. The EAP course then as blended learning was designed with consideration to these criteria, the course learning outcomes related to EAP and a thoughtful and effective mixture of onsite and online materials, exercises, assignments and other content. The EAP learning goals for the course were the foundation for planning the division between onsite and online components, and they were as follows:

- Practicing and developing writing and presentation skills in English in the context of academic study of Business and Economics with lectures, classroom activities, pair and small-group discussions and written and oral exercises
- Practicing formal English language use in writing and in oral communication, including argumentation and critical use of references
- Activating academic vocabulary for increased lexical variety in written and oral communication
- Developing academic presentation skills in connection with students’ research interests
- Providing constructive peer feedback to others on academic writing and presentations skills

**Course content**
The course was constructed as an 11-week blended learning course, with an onsite kick-off, main components online, onsite presentation and optional feedback and course ending, as illustrated in figure 1.

![Fig. 1. Online and onsite blend in the EAP course.](image)

The structure, content and blend of the course materials and activities can be viewed in table 1. Information and instructions on the larger assignments on the course were available for students from the beginning of the course.

**Table 1 Blended learning course content and schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Onsite / Online</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Materials, task(s) or larger assignment(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Onsite kick-off, continued online</td>
<td>Introduction to the course</td>
<td>- Online: Introduction to the course&lt;br&gt;- Online: Group discussions on EAP experiences&lt;br&gt;- Onsite task: Students write a sample text&lt;br&gt;- Online task: Participants’ reflective introductions and peer comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Academic style in writing</td>
<td>- Online materials on academic style and formality&lt;br&gt;- Lecturer feedback on sample texts (with audio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>Format</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3      | Online | Critical review                               | Task: Students rewrite a section of the sample text into more formal style  
|        |        |                                               | Task: Peer feedback on rewritten sections |
| 4      | Online | Structuring essays, use of referencing        | Assignment: Critical review on a journal article  
|        |        |                                               | Exercises on academic vocabulary |
| 5      | Online | Preparing academic presentations               | Online materials on referencing and structuring writing  
|        |        |                                               | Task: Students post reflections on their writing process, with peer comments |
| 6      | Online | Academic presentations and essays             | Lecturer’s video feedback on critical reviews, detailed marking and assessment sent to students by e-mail  
|        |        |                                               | Online materials on preparing academic presentations, with video examples |
|        |        |                                               | Task: Students send in a video analysis (5 min) on their presentation experiences and any concerns about more formal presentations |
| 7      | Online | Academic essay                                | Assignment: Academic essay (c. 1000 words) |
| 8      | Onsite | Presentations                                 | Assignment: Delivering an academic presentation on campus, with peer feedback and discussion  
|        |        |                                               | Presentations recorded and files sent to students |
| 9      | Online | Presentation self-analysis                    | Task: Written or video self-analysis of the presentation performance and audience feedback |
In practice the online components of the course were executed through the Moodle online learning environment. Moodle as a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a typical delivery mode of the online part of a blended learning course for university purposes (Sharma, 2010) as it offers a great variety of functions such as integrating instructional material (via audio, video and text), e-mail, live chat sessions, online discussions, forums, quizzes, tests and assignments.

With the variety of tasks in the course, the role of the teacher was more of a facilitator rather than a lecturer (cf. Lernstrup, 2013), and the responsibility of the learning process was transferred more towards the students. Blended learning also allows instructors to promote behavioural, emotional and cognitive processes and development, highlighting the importance of reflection on learning processes (Yang, 2011). According to Picciano (2009), blending with purpose comprises of not only content but supporting students socially and emotionally in both the online components and the face-to-face meetings. Students should also be engaged to dialectics or questioning for instance through discussion boards in the online environment, and to reflective and collaborative learning, with a wide variety of methods, including online tools for the synthesis, evaluation and assessment of students' learning.

These principles were thus adopted in the construction of the EAP course as blended learning, i.e. the role of the lecturer was diminished and most of the discussion, reflection and commentary during the weekly tasks was performed by the students themselves as peer feedback or comments. After all, peer assessment can improve the tasks of both the author and the reviewer as students can identify strengths and weaknesses in their peers’ work (Stein & Graham, 2014). Asynchronous online tools typical of blended learning such as discussion forums, email and wikis lists (MacDonald, 2008; Stein & Graham, 2014) were actively used throughout the course to engage the students to the collaborative learning process and to commit them to what Glazer (2011) refers to as essential in effective online learning: discourse, reflection and writing. In some weeks, online lectures were also used to relay information to the students on new topics. However, the online lectures were always supported by other materials and were kept relatively short (between 6 and 12 minutes) to ensure the students’ interest. The lectures were then rather prefaces to the week’s tasks and activities rather than traditional classroom lectures, which in any case are often rare in ESP and EAP teaching.
Online EAP writing assignments

The main assessed assignments on the course were connected to academic writing and presentations. In addition to the weekly tasks, students composed a critical review (c. 600 words) on a chosen journal article related to their own research interests and an academic essay (c. 1000 words) on their own research interests and/or Bachelor’s thesis. The main written tasks were chosen to benefit the students’ studies in Business and Economics and to elicit selective and purpose-driven reading and critical thinking (cf. Johns, 2009). To combat plagiarism in the writing assignments completed online, a common concern in EAP writing (Bloch, 2013), students provided a brief sample of their writing (45 minutes) in the first onsite meeting of the course and later the plagiarism software Turnitin® was applied to check students’ assignments and instruct them in the use of proper referencing and paraphrasing techniques.

Onsite EAP oral assignment

In the main oral assignment, students prepared an academic presentation on a topic related to their own research interests, with suitable formality and use of reference materials. Students of Business and Economics at UEF are required to attend two previous ESP courses prior to this EAP course so they have already acquired experience preparing and delivering field-specific presentations in English. The transition into a more academic and formal style of presenting is therefore not considered overly challenging yet the use of more formal language and speaking on a research-based subject have been the main causes of concern with students on this course. This can refer to what Hyland (2009) has seen as a potential problem for undergraduate speakers in ESP and EAP classes, i.e. the adoption of an appropriate tenor, or interpersonal attitude to the audience, since students both seek to display knowledge and a presentational competence to the lecturer and also speak directly to their classmates.

The onsite presentation situation on the EAP course was, however, made arguably more comfortable for the students who had spent the majority of the course online, by the arrangement that students deliver their presentations to small groups of 4-5 students and the lecturer. This smaller audience was considered easier for all students but particularly those with performance anxiety or otherwise nerves about presenting (in English), and the smaller group of attendees also made providing peer feedback less strenuous when given in writing to only four or five fellow students.

Data collection and analysis

Data on the implementation and execution of the blended learning EAP course was gathered electronically with the course feedback form after two occasions: spring semester 2014 and autumn semester 2015. During those two semesters, 106 students of Business and Economics at UEF attended the EAP course, and 24 students provided optional feedback on the course with the electronic form, with a response rate of 23.1 %.
Students were not given any course credit or other incentive to provide feedback on the course.

The feedback form (see appendix) had six identical questions in both semesters, one multiple choice, two Likert scale and three open-ended questions. Students were asked to indicate their preferred mode of study for the course: blended, classroom, no preference or a chance to choose, and reasons for the choice. Students were also asked to evaluate the learning and teaching materials used on the blended learning EAP course with open-ended answers, the course workload using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = too much and 5 = very suitable), the learning atmosphere using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not encouraging and 5 = encouraging), and the most challenging aspects of the course as open-ended answers.

Descriptive statistics and frequencies of the response options were used to analyse the multiple choice and Likert scale questions. The qualitative open-ended responses were analysed using content analysis, with a coding scheme created for each individual question. The open-ended responses were coded using the original Finnish language to avoid any second-hand analysis of analysing the translated data instead of the original.

Results and Discussion

The EAP blended learning course in the spring semester 2014 and autumn semester 2015 was attended by 106 students. Of the participants 63.2 % (n=67) were male and 36.8 % (n=39) were female. This division can be seen as indicative of the gender representation of Business and Economics at UEF since in 2015 the UEF Business School hosted 633 Bachelor’s level students, of whom 65.4 % were male and 34.6 % were female (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). Overall in Finnish universities the gender division in 2015 was 48.9 % males and 51.1 % females (ibid.) so this emphasises the more male-oriented preference to Business and Economics studies at UEF. However, gender was not specified in the course feedback form and therefore it will not be discussed separately in the results.

Blended learning vs. classroom learning

In the course feedback form students were asked about the course mode, i.e. if they preferred the blended learning they had attended, would have preferred classroom teaching, had no preference or would have liked the option to choose between blended or classroom teaching. The results (N=24) are listed in table 2.
Table 2 Frequency of the students’ preference to the course mode (N=24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred course mode</th>
<th>Frequency (N=24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teaching</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a choice between blended or classroom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preference</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in table 2, the majority of students (n=18, 75%) preferred the blended learning option for the EAP course they had attended. Students were asked to specify reasons in open-ended answers for their selection in the follow-up question. Content analysis revealed two main reasons for the preference to blended learning: time management and convenience. Below are comments written by students, translated from the original Finnish. The comments are identified with a letter marker S (student) and numerical marker (1-24).

Especially for my own busy spring this blended learning was an excellent fit. (S1)

Blended learning is a good choice since I have also other courses to complete and work to go to. (S2)

Not having to sit in compulsory classes for several hours every week made it easier to plan my studies, which is important at the end of the Bachelor’s level. (S3)

I liked the blended learning because it suited my own schedule better than required classroom meetings. (S9)

The results appear to reflect similar findings obtained in previous studies of university-level blended learning where students have expressed high satisfaction with the implementation of blended learning (Albrecht, 2006), with particular emphasis on convenience. Similar trends related to positive responses to reduced attendance requirements have also been found by Sharpe et al. (2006) and the subsequent time-saving and flexibility aspect of blended learning by Moskal and Cavanagh (2014).

Working and/or studying at a distance from the university campus have also been one of the main rationales for the implementation of blended learning (e.g. Gaebel et al., 2014), visible also in this study in the student responses:
A blended learning course is a crucial option for a distance learning student. (S11)

Blended learning makes it possible to move and it’s not tied to any one place and that’s important. (S15)

This also carries a connection to the initial reason for the UEF Business School to request the EAP course to be offered as a blended learning course. With a diverse student population and the extensive numbers of distance learning students at UEF and its Business School, blended learning courses also for language and communication courses will arguably grow in demand.

Students who either would have preferred the course to run as classroom teaching (n=4) or would have liked to have been able to choose between a blended learning and a classroom learning option (n=1) in the open-ended answers mostly missed the contact of face-to-face communication. This has also been a frequent misgiving in previous findings on blended learning where students have indicated that classroom communication is a vital component of higher education (Akyol & Garrison, 2011) and in blended learning some students have missed the efficiency of instant responses, personal contact and peer interaction (So & Brush, 2008; Picciano, 2009). These same themes were also visible in the student responses on this EAP course:

I still feel I would have learned more in classroom teaching because my own participation would have been more active. (S12)

It could be useful to have the option to choose between blended and classroom, at least for students with poor language skills, to get the optimal level of learning. (S17)

Some number of classroom meetings would suit me better because they bring presence to the course. Now I felt the course practically didn’t exist. (S18)

Hence clearly some students felt they would have benefitted more from the classroom learning environment, particularly in an EAP language and communication course such as this. Admittedly, one of the downsides of blended learning for EAP courses can be the reduced amount of face-to-face oral practice, even though in this course audio and video were used in the course activities and tasks.

Learning and teaching methods
Students were also asked to evaluate the learning and teaching methods with open-ended answers, with 21 of the 24 respondents providing feedback in writing. Overall,
the student responses to the weekly tasks, instructions and materials were positive, with some students focusing on the weekly tasks and course progression and some on the larger written and oral assignments.

_I felt the tasks and assignments were challenging enough to acquire learning. The weekly tasks were good because I was able to keep myself at a certain pace._ (S2)

_The weekly tasks were suitable and I was able to complete them every week and not have something huge at the end of the course. The smaller weekly tasks also gave a better chance to complete different types of activities and learn academic English in various ways._ (S3)

_Versatile teaching methods: different written tasks, discussions, video, presentation._ (S4)

While these comments on the EAP blended learning course are overall positive and encouraging, the comments could mostly also apply to any regularly scheduled classroom teaching course for EAP skills. The variety of methods was appreciated yet the same variety can be seen in most ESP and EAP teaching in university language centres across Finland, the European Higher Education Area and globally. Therefore, a more suitable comparison with the methods could have been drawn with other online or blended courses that the students had attended during their studies where they may have had less interaction and fewer tasks on a weekly basis and instead materials to read and a larger learning assignment to complete at the end of the course.

On this course the consistent and active use of weekly tasks, reflection and peer comments were considered essential to developing academic English communication skills in a blended learning environment. Since blended learning allows students more time to reflect on their thoughts rather than participate in discussions instantaneously in the classroom, this was a systematic part of the course progression, and also commented on by one student in the course feedback:

_I think studying at home and thinking about the style in peace was even more effective than attending limited hours in the classroom._ (S7)

Glazer (2011) and Stein and Graham (2014) have argued that for this very reason blended learning is often beneficial for quieter or more hesitant students who can utilise more time to express themselves through written online tasks and discussions.

Another key element of blended learning, cooperative and collaborative learning, was also emphasised on this EAP course as students repeatedly provided peer feedback to each other, on both the weekly tasks and the larger assignments. In previous studies
on blended learning in the university context, students have equated blended learning with a sense of community, collaborative inquiry and deep learning (Voegele, 2014) and a similar process was identified with at least two students in the course feedback:

At least for me it was useful to get peer feedback from other students on my writing and nice to read others’ thoughts about the same subject. (S8)

The best thing about this course was the writing tasks and the feedback received from both the instructor and other students. (S14)

Workload
The EAP course was a 3 ECTS credit course which means students were expected to ‘attend’ the course for c. 36 hours and study independently for c. 45 hours. The larger assignments on this blended learning course were the same as completed when the course was organised as a traditional classroom teaching course. The main difference in the workload could be argued to be the required attendance of two hours twice a week for nine weeks, versus independent weekly tasks for nine weeks and presentations and feedback sessions on campus. A 5-point Likert scale was used to determine the perceived workload of the students on this course, the results of which can be seen in figure 2.

Fig. 2 Workload in the blended learning EAP course (N=24).

The mean for the perceived workload in the Likert scale between 1 (too much) and 5 (very suitable) was 3.48, with a median of 4 and standard deviation of 1.04. This would indicate the students found the amount of work required on the course mostly reasonable. At times Finnish university students on ESP and EAP courses have complained about the amount of work required with the variety of exercises, assignments and required attendance (cf. Author, 2014) yet in this case with the required attendance mostly removed, the workload, while taking virtually the same number of
weeks with weekly tasks and larger assignments, was still considered reasonable and manageable.

Learning atmosphere
Another 5-point Likert scale question in the course feedback form was connected to the perceived learning atmosphere, with 1 = not encouraging and 5 = encouraging. Questions related to the learning atmosphere are also recommended for all feedback forms at the University of Eastern Finland and therefore also relevant in this EAP course feedback form. The learning atmosphere in most learning is often the classroom atmosphere but in blended learning the atmosphere can be seen to comprise of the tasks, instructions, the style and tone they are written, the student and lecturer comments, the students’ peer feedback comments and the overall tone of the course. Hadfield (2013) maintains that a positive atmosphere can be beneficial to the morale, motivation and self-image of the class or course participants so attempts should be made in all learning to entice this elusive, intangible quality.

Because of the nature of blended learning and in this course the prominent use of the online component, it was also vital to distinguish how students perceived this type and mode of learning in their field-specific and academic language and communication studies which traditionally have emphasised face-to-face communication situations in the classroom. The scores for the course learning atmosphere are illustrated in figure 3.

![Learning atmosphere in the blended learning EAP course (N=24).](image)

The results for learning atmosphere for this blended learning course for EAP are encouraging since 23 of the 24 (95.8 %) students were either satisfied or very satisfied with the learning atmosphere during the course. Similar high percentages of overall course satisfaction have been obtained in US studies of blended learning (e.g. Dziuban et al., 2006; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014).
Perceived challenges in the EAP blended learning course

The final item on the course feedback form concerned challenges posed by the course, either with blended learning or the course content. The open-ended question was answered in writing by 18 of the 24 respondents, with six students leaving the question blank. From this it could be inferred several students on the course did not find any specific element of the course mode or content too challenging for their skills or knowledge.

From the 18 responses most students found academic writing to be the most challenging of the course (n=6), followed by delivering an academic presentation (n=4) (Table 3).

Table 3 Comments received from students regarding the most challenging aspect of the EAP blended learning course (n=18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (n=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic writing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic presentation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course subject (EAP)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall the comments would appear to signal the general challenges of adapting to a more formal style of English as academic writing and presentations were considered the most challenging. As academic style requires the use of academic vocabulary and longer, more complex language structures, it is an advanced level of English, especially for non-native speakers. However, while writing, presentation skills and the course subject of EAP were generally the most common topics posing challenges on the course, four comments could be deduced to relate to blended learning: motivation (n=2), self-study (n=2) and time management (n=1). Therefore, for some students the course mode of blended learning was the primary challenge in the learning process, with comments confirming these tendencies:

Finding the motivation to study was difficult. (S1)

Independent study and motivation to the independent study were the most challenging to me. (S12)
Perhaps finding a pace for the tasks and assignments and starting early enough. (S17)

Time management because I was working on my Bachelor’s thesis and it was difficult to disconnect and focus on this course. (S24)

Some of the comments could be also infer to general study motivation or time management which can be challenges for some students in higher education. However, the emphasis on independent study seems evident and the need for some students to obtain more structured classroom learning to help them pace the course content and assignments more effectively.

**Conclusions**

This study aimed to explore non-native university students’ perceptions of learning English academic writing and presentation skills through blended learning. The purpose was to determine how students viewed blended learning in general and in connection to their EAP studies, if any would have preferred classroom teaching, and how they perceived the materials, methods, workload, learning atmosphere and challenges in the EAP course organised as blended learning.

The results of the study indicate that the Finnish university students of Business and Economics demonstrated an enthusiasm for blended learning, particularly for its convenience, flexibility and greater allowances for individual time management, reflecting similar results obtained in earlier studies on blended learning in higher education (cf. Albrecht, 2006; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014; Sharpe et al., 2006). A vast majority (75 %, n=18) of the respondents on the course preferred the blended learning mode they had attended, with only a few (n=4) indicating a need for more traditional classroom learning. While some students did show an inclination for more face-to-face contact, overall these results appear to support the implementation of blended learning for EAP courses.

Nevertheless, the role of face-to-face communication in EAP studies should remain prominent but the methods to implement the personal contact can be varied. With this course, some students signalled the need for more classroom communication to activate their speaking skills and to commit them more strongly to the course. However, on the whole these Finnish university students were able to commit to the blended learning course through the weekly tasks, posting comments and peer feedback and attending the few onsite sessions. It would appear that this combination of commitment and flexibility created a positive learning experience on the course.

While the course lasted for 11 weeks and most weeks included smaller weekly tasks and/or larger written or oral assignments, the workload for the course was considered
either very suitable or very reasonable by 58% (n=14) of the respondents. Similarly, the learning atmosphere on the course was considered either encouraging or good by 95% (n=23) of the respondents which can be seen as a positive result in any type of learning process. In this blended learning mode, it also reflects the variety of tasks and the active use of peer comments and feedback and instructor comments and feedback throughout the course.

Teaching EAP skills in any higher education institution to non-native speakers of English can be a challenging task but the results of this study indicate that blended learning is a viable option and a learning mode that today’s busy and digitally adept students appreciate. Today’s university students seem to have recognised the role of blended learning in encouraging them to learn more independently and taking responsibility for their time management (Riley et al., 2014). Effective blended learning still requires finding a balance between the online and onsite components in connection to the course learning outcomes, content and assessment through careful planning. In addition, developing any EAP blended learning course benefits intensely from student feedback and perceptions to create the most effectively blend of information and activities to entice meaningful learning. Ideally, the results of this study, while limited in size and scope, will encourage more EAP instructors to utilise blended learning with EAP writing and presentation skills as for students the benefits of the blend seem significant.

References
Author (2014).


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Appendices

Appendix A

Questions from the EAP course feedback form

1. This course on academic writing and presentation skills is currently organised as a blended learning course. What is your preference to the course mode? (Select one only)
   - Blended learning
   - Classroom learning
   - I have no preference
   - I would like the chance to choose between blended and classroom learning

2. Please specify your reasons for the selection above (open-ended)

3. How would you evaluate the teaching and learning methods and materials used on this blended learning course? (open-ended)

4. How do you evaluate the course workload for yourself?
   - 1 = too much
   - 2 = heavy but can be done
   - 3 = OK
   - 4 = very reasonable
   - 5 = very suitable

5. How do you evaluate the learning atmosphere on this course?
   - 1 = not encouraging
   - 2 = could be better
   - 3 = OK
   - 4 = good
   - 5 = encouraging

6. What did you consider most challenging on this blended learning method? (open-ended)