Learners’ perceptions of online elements in a beginners’ language blended course – implications for CALL design

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Learners’ perceptions of online elements in a beginners’ language blended course – implications for CALL design

Hélène Pulker and Elodie Vialleton, Department of Languages, The Open University, UK
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Overview

• Introduction
• Blended learning for adult education
• Aims of study
• Methodology
• Findings and discussion
• Some final thoughts
• Questions
Context

- A scholarship project on student retention
- A longitudinal study:
  - 2012/13: learning analytics
  - 2013/14: interviews
  - 2014/15: in-depth analysis of end-of-course student survey
- Some continuing students, majority is new
- Module only or as part of a degree
- Blended course within a context of distance learning for adult education
Distance learners

- A very diverse student body with varied cultural, social and educational backgrounds
- Majority working full-time or part-time or in career break/change
- Different goals, aspirations and motivations for studies – they exercise some autonomy within the course
- 66% female and 34% male
- Medium age is over 45

(Coleman and Furnborough, 2010)
Adult learners

Knowles’ (1990) six assumptions about adult learning:

- The need to know
- Learner’s experience
- Learners capacity for self-direction
- Readiness to learn determined by life circumstances
- Orientation to learning favours problem solving
- Motivation affected by personal factors
Distance learning theories

- **Behaviourist**
  - Books, step-by-step activities, guides, individual support

- **Constructivist**
  - Tutorials
  - Community of learners
  - Face-to-face

- **Cognitivist**
  - Assessment and feedback
Blended learning

Face-to-face learning + Online learning = Blended learning
The MIT model

(schedule) synchronous ↔ asynchronous

(participation) individual ↔ community

(technology) off-line ↔ online

(guidance) instructor-led ↔ self-paced
The Agilant Learning Model: Five Ingredients for the blend

- Live events
- Online content
- Collaboration
- Assessment
- Reference materials
Our blended model

Print and analogue
- course guide
- course books
- audio CDs

Online and digital
- assessment
- e-assessment
- exam
- course website
- study planner
- study resources
- online resources
- online revision
- forums
- online rooms

Face to face
- tutorials
- day schools
Aim of study

• To examine the new students’ perceptions of the online elements of the blend
• To identify possible problematic areas in the blend
Collection of data

- 110 students did not submit the second assignment
- 27 were new and registered on a qualification
- 132 students did not submit the third assignment
- 51 were new and registered on a qualification
- Four students interviewed
Method and data analysis

• One hour telephone interviews
• Researcher from the Institute of Technology department
• Two to three months after submission date
• Recorded and transcribed verbatim
• Four ‘at risk’ participants: three new students, one continuing, three registered on a degree and one on module-only
• Thematic analysis and coding system underpinned by the Agilant Learning model of blended learning
Findings (1)

Live events:
- Lack of face-to-face tutorials
- Online webinars cause frustration and anxiety (technology)
- Lack of possibilities to practise (mainly speaking skills)

Self-paced activities:
- False expectations with regard to pace and amount of learning (workload issues)
- A clear preference for structured, linear activities in books and praise for the study planner
- Lack of clarity about purpose of activities, resources and tools
- Complexity of the blended learning model (language practice activities vs interactive Computer Marked Assignments, different formats, forums that are not read, website navigation and jargon!...)
Findings (2)

Collaboration/Support:
- Students not interested in chit-chat with peers
- Unable to find forums at times
- Confusion between different people's remits (tutors, module team, Computer Helpdesk, learner support office)
- Excellent one-to-one support from tutors

Assessment:
- Overall students are satisfied with assessment and feedback
- Lack of clarity regarding iCMAs
- Sometimes unaware of requirements to pass the course

Reference materials:
- A strong preference for print over online materials
- Confusion about materials and resources
Sense of confusion

• “The main problem for me on L192 is prioritizing. Knowing what materials are essential and what are optional”. (Respondent A)
• “No, I haven’t made use of the online skills activities or online pronunciation guide, no I am not too sure I was aware of that, but there you are”. (Respondent B)
• “Forums? I haven’t seen anything yet”. (Respondent B)
• “Online skills activities? I am not sure about those. Are they on the website? Haven’t come across them”. (Respondent C)
• “The only thing I found complicated was accessing. There’s lot of information that you get given at the beginning”. (Respondent D)
Sense of frustration

• “F2f is good for networking with peers and for reassurance, but OU live tutorials are frustrating” (Respondent A).
• “Online would be beneficial except I can’t stand working online. I hate it” (Respondent B).
• “I found the module website difficult” (Respondent B).
• “It’s irritating that we have to put the right number of spaces in […] . Yes, I used the online revision activities, those are the ones that caused me aggravation” (Respondent C).
• “I attended a couple of online tutorials. I found them very frustrating” (Respondent C).
• “There is so many people on there and a lot of them just post things like: oo how is everyone getting on with their assignments or you know… It’s stuff that I don’t really find interesting. […] If I wanted to ask something, I am not going to ask the other students, I’d rather just ask the tutor” (Respondent C).
Sense of frustration

• “You know, you could post something to say: what did everyone think of this unit. Who cares? I just want to get it, you know, completed, you know, it is what it is. Or some people tried to ask some advice. *I think well the tutor, that’s what the tutors are there for*” (Respondent D).
Sense of personal choice

• “I do use the website – what do I use it for? I like the planner, the study planner, yes, that’s really good. I mean… I don’t use the forum very much but that’s a personal choice and that’s because I don’t get involved in any forum in any context – for people who like that sort of things that is good. Then I use it for submitting my assignments and collecting my results” (Respondent C).

• “I think what I’d like to see would be at the end of every unit would be to have a sort of – is to have a sort of summary an exercise – almost like a revision exercise in the book – so a revision exercise” (Respondent C).

• “I’ve used the study planner and I’ve used the overview pages to help me identify what key things I need to be able to get my assignments completed” (Respondent D).
Sense of personal choice

• “I must admit, face-to-face, for me, is the best. In the ideal world I would like a lot more face-to-face tutorials. [...] I don’t know if it is possible but I think that face-to-face is very important. [...] It’s language learning and I think the type of people that want to learn languages will naturally be, well I guess I’m making a wide assumption here, but they will naturally be people that want to learn, like another culture through meeting people. [...] The most enjoyable aspect of the course I must admit I think it might have to be the face-to-face tutorials. [...] I find quite demotivating just sitting on my own studying, a lot of the time. [...] Because, you know, for me, again, you know, I work on computers all day and then I might have finished work at 8 o’clock at night and then there might be a tutorial at that time, which again, it’s online tutorial, here we go again on the computer. Or then I’ve got to listen to my audio resources, again I need to get the computer on. Which, I’m one of these people, because I work on computers I hate using them at home. I think the face-to-face is what brings it to life. You know, I go through phases where for two months I think ooh, this is right okay, I need to spend a couple of hours, do this, do that. And then when I go to the face-to-face tutorial I feel wow, this is what I’m doing it for, I really enjoy that and I really learn a lot” (Respondent D).
Distance learning theories

- **Behaviourist**
  - Books, step-by-step activities, guides, individual support

- **Constructivist**
  - Tutorials
  - Community of learners
  - Face-to-face

- **Cognitivist**
  - Assessment and feedback

Online learning theories

- **Cognitivist**
  - Assessment and feedback, online content, books

- **Connectivist**
  - Blogs, social networking, forums, contacts and resources online

- **Constructivist**
  - Tutorials, forums, VLE
Limitation

• Although the sample is very small
  – it is representative of a certain group of language learners
  – findings corroborate previous investigation using learning analytics data
  – some of the issues have been highlighted in the OU Student Retention and Progression 2012/2013 report
  – findings resonate with some other studies of online language learning

• Need further in-depth study of learner’s behaviours, actions and choices with regard to the different aspects of the blend and reasons for using some elements over others.
Final thoughts

• Is there a need for more instructions in the (distance) learning materials?
• Should we move to a model of activities ‘à la carte’ or drop-in sessions rather than ‘one-fits-all’ tutorials?
• Does the asynchronous element of blended learning facilitate language learning?
• Should we look at what is informal learning in language acquisition?
• Should we expect learners to work out and agree personal learning plans?
Thank you for your attention!

Any thoughts, comments, questions?

Helene.pulker@open.ac.uk