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

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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
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
Why blended learning?
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).
http://www.vapa.nl/projecten/blended-learning/
Distance learning theories

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

Constructivist
Tutorials
Community of learners
Face-to-face

Cognitivist
Assessment and feedback

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

Online learning theories

Cognitivist
Assessment and feedback, online content, books

Constructivist
Tutorials, forums, VLE

Connectivist
Blogs, social networking, forums, contacts and resources online
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?

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