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

Hélène Pulker¹ and Elodie Vialleton²

Abstract. Much research has been done on blended learning and the design of tasks most appropriate for online environments and computer-mediated communication. Increasingly, language teachers and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) practitioners recognise the different nature of communications in online settings and in face-to-face settings; teachers do not simply attempt to replicate face-to-face interactions in online synchronous tutorials, but combine their pedagogical expertise with the affordances of the computer-mediated system they use to produce the conditions for effective language learning. However, there is less evidence that the role and importance of the interplay between pedagogy and technology in online language teaching has been taken into consideration in the learning design of blended courses, where the emphasis is increasingly on the online elements. There is also scant evidence on students' perceptions of the online components in blended language courses. This paper reflects upon the experience of the delivery of a beginners' language course using blended learning in an open and distance learning context.

Keywords: blended learning, distance learning, CALL design.

1. Introduction

Over the years, course developers of open and distance learning materials have traditionally been using instructional design theory combining three theories

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applicable to adult education – behaviourist, cognitivist and constructionist – to create materials that would replicate what a teacher does in the classroom. Language course developers at the Open University, UK have been following this model, designing language learning courses blending different media and different methods of delivery, thus blending learning theories according to specific learning situations. However, in the last eight years or so, course developers have been gradually integrating a fourth dimension – a connectivist approach – by increasing asynchronous online elements in their blend, replacing some of the face-to-face and instructor-led elements with online and collaborative learning elements. Research shows that blended learning is a successful method of delivery in traditional universities where asynchronous online activities complement the learning taking place in the classroom. However, there is scant literature on blended learning in the context of distance learning, and especially on the perceptions of students of the online elements within a distance learning course.

This paper reports on the second phase of a longitudinal study carried out at the Open University, UK. A three year investigation was set up to identify learners' behaviours and perceptions of the online elements of a French beginners' blended learning course designed for adults studying at a distance. The first phase of the investigation (2012-13) consisted in examining learning analytics data of learners' usage of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and online elements of the course. It revealed that learners' engagement with a number of online elements, such as asynchronous interactive revision activities for example, was limited. A qualitative study was carried out in the second phase of the investigation (2013-14) to further examine learners' perceptions of the online elements of the blended course and in order to identify potential problematic areas of the blend.

2. Method

2.1. Context of study

Adult learners studying at the Open University constitute a very diverse student body with varied cultural, social and educational backgrounds. The majority is in full-time or part-time employment or taking a career break. The medium age is over 45 and 66% are female. Most importantly, students have different goals, aspirations and motivations for studies, and they do exercise some autonomy when engaging with the course (Coleman & Furnborough, 2010). Most students registered on the French beginners' module are new to language learning, and for the majority it is the first module they have studied at the Open University and in distance-learning mode.

The Open University model of blended learning for beginners language courses combines the five key ingredients of the Agilant Learning Model (Carman, 2005), including: live tutorials in the classroom and online through a web-conferencing system, online content (activities, tools and resources in the VLE), collaboration (face-to-face and in online discussions through forums), assessment (four tutor-marked assignments, four interactive computer-marked assignments and one end-of-module assignment, all submitted electronically), and reference learning materials (course books, study guides, feedback, study resources in the VLE, etc.). Every ingredient of the blend incorporates the factors listed by Pankin, Roberts, and Savio (2012), i.e. schedule (synchronous and asynchronous), participation (individual and in the community), technology (online and offline), and guidance (instructor-led and self-paced activities). Learners had approximately 20 hours of a mix of synchronous and asynchronous contact with their teacher and general support. They studied from October 2013 to September 2014.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

We conducted the second phase of the study throughout the 2013-14 academic year. We contacted the 27 students who had failed to submit their second assignment in March and the 51 students who had failed to submit their third assignment in May. Four students volunteered to participate in a qualitative survey: three were new to the Open University, one was continuing their studies, three were registered on a degree programme and one was studying the French beginners' course as a stand alone module. We conducted a one-hour telephone interview with each participant. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data was analysed following a thematic analysis approach and a coding system based on the dimensions of Carman's (2005) Agilant Learning model of blended learning.

3. Discussion

Blended learning provides new opportunities of interaction with peers and teachers for the language learners. It can develop communication and digital literacy skills, and foster independent and collaborative learning as asynchronous discussions allow time and mental space for reflection, and therefore students have the opportunity to be part of a community of learners and be responsible for constructing their own learning. Blended learning is even seen as a possible way to overcome the challenges of distance education, isolation and self-motivation, and potentially transform education through critical reflection (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Mezirow, 1991). However, the findings of phase two of our study

show that an increased amount of asynchronous support and activities has not addressed the lack of social interaction which is a critical aspect of distance learning. Despite the richness and quality of interactions in online forums between students themselves and between teachers and students, the participation is only limited to a minority of students whose learning styles suit this mode of communication. Students expressed a preference for conventional methods of learning (books and face-to-face tutorials) for practical, technical and also pedagogical reasons.

Participants also reported a lack of clarity about the purpose of some of the online activities and of some of the resources and tools (for example, the pronunciation guide). The first phase of the study, using learning analytics, revealed general low usage of online forums and online materials, as well as a general preference for a structured and linear sequence of activities. The phase two interviews revealed a clear sense of confusion, suggesting that a certain type of learners on beginners' language distance courses may respond better to formal rather than informal approaches to language learning.

4. Conclusions

Collis (2003) points out that online learning components often require a large amount of self-discipline on the part of the learners and Simpson (2013) argues that the most important individual success criterion is the student's motivation to learn, and that universities should redirect their efforts on reaching out to students and maintaining their initial motivation levels “rather than focusing entirely on teaching” (p. 112). We may therefore ask how blended learning in distance education can foster self-regulation and autonomy. Do we encourage our learners to reflect sufficiently on their own learning and are we explicit enough about the purpose of the materials and about how they can find their own pathways to meet their personal goals? Should we expect students to design and agree on personal learning plans? Moreover, our study further suggests that evidence should be sought about whether or how asynchronous elements of a blended course facilitate language learning, and that more enquiries would be required to investigate aspects of informal learning in language acquisition in the context of blended language learning.

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