

opción

Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,
Linguística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

Año 35, diciembre 2019 N°

24

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

ISSN 1012-1587/ ISSNe: 2477-9385

Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



Universidad del Zulia
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Maracaibo - Venezuela

The Effectiveness of Blended Learning on Learners' Interaction and Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of Blended Learning in the form of lecturer-learner, learner-learner and learner-course materials interaction with learners' satisfaction in an English Proficiency course. Both qualitative and quantitative methods will be used to conduct this study at the Higher Education Institution (HEI). As a result, Learner to course materials interaction means that learners need to interact, digest and learn the course content that they receive from an expert. In conclusion, universities are paying serious attention to low satisfaction among learners because it may give universities a negative image and indirectly affect learners' enrolment to that particular university.

Keywords: Blended, Learning, English, Proficiency, Course.

La efectividad del aprendizaje mixto en la interacción y satisfacción de los alumnos

Resumen

Este estudio examina la efectividad de Blended Learning en la forma de interacción entre el profesor y el alumno, el alumno y el alumno y el curso del alumno con la satisfacción de los alumnos en un

curso de dominio del inglés. Se utilizarán métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos para realizar este estudio en la Institución de Educación Superior (HEI). Como resultado, la interacción de los materiales del alumno con el curso significa que los alumnos deben interactuar, digerir y aprender el contenido del curso que reciben de un experto. En conclusión, las universidades están prestando mucha atención a la baja satisfacción entre los estudiantes porque puede dar a las universidades una imagen negativa y afectar indirectamente la inscripción de los estudiantes en esa universidad en particular.

Palabras clave: Mezclado, Aprendizaje, Inglés, Competencia, Curso.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English using technology is not a new phenomenon in the Higher Education Institution (HEI). It is believed that the use of technology in an English language class would bring an interactive learning environment for learners to learn a language and enhance the learning process. Like in other countries, Malaysia also takes pride to improve learners' English proficiency by introducing Blended Learning (BL) approach. In the key shift 9 of the Malaysia blueprint; Globalised Online Learning has focuses on the need for the BL implementation to all learners within HEI in Malaysia (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (MOE, 2015).

BL is defined as a combination of traditional face-to-face (f2f) and technology-enhanced component which continue enhancing learners' language learning (GLEASON, 2013). For this study, BL is defined as a blend of f2f and UUM online learning. The BL approach

emerged due to the strength and weaknesses of f2f and online learning to achieve a certain goal of any program. SIEW-ENG & MUUK (2015) mentioned that BL is a learning environment that can suit learners and provide satisfaction to learners with the use of mixed approaches to learning. It is an approach that offers more experiences to learners rather than a single learning experience as learners can experience two different types of learning approaches in a course.

In the effort to help graduates to be proficient in the English language, Malaysian HEI has been mandated a large scale of effort to change the teaching and learning approach in English course to blended format to make sure all crucial aspects are covered. However, this change has been very slow as there were numbers of learners who are still lack of proficiency, particularly in English. This has made certain parties, especially instructors and learners themselves worrying about this unsettled issue. Even though learners have been using the English language for more than 11 years starting from kindergarten up to the higher level but the number of unskilled learners in an English course is still in debate. This scenario is also happening in one of the courses in the Bachelor's degree program of Universiti Malaysia (UUM); English Proficiency 1 (EP 1) course. At the beginning of BL implementation of EP1 course in 2016 up to at present, the number of learners with low proficiency level has reached to 3290 learners. These learners are considered as low proficiency learners as their Malaysian Universiti English Test (MUET) was in between band 1 and 2 according to the aggregated score of MUET.

The objective of the EP 1 course is to improve learners' English proficiency level, which covered the four core skills; speaking, listening, reading and writing. Learners need to complete and pass this EP1 course before they can proceed to other English proficiency or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. In the course, learners are introduced with different types of assessments and activities comprising individual, pair and group work. With 42 total hours of learning, learners experienced a wide variety of social interaction in different contexts including with the instructor, peers and course materials within and without class hour. The present study is conducted with the aim to examine the effectiveness of UUM blended learning on learners' satisfaction through interaction in an English proficiency course. The relation between learner to instructor, learner to learner and learner to course material which influencing learners' satisfaction in BL will be identified.

As ARBAUGH (2014) puts it, one of the ways to evaluate the effectiveness of BL is through the users' satisfaction. Learners are likely to be satisfied in the learning environment when the services they received meet the expectations or beyond their expectations. WU, TENNYSON & HSIA (2010) define learners' satisfaction as the learners' feeling and attitude when they receive what they expected from a learning environment. On the contrary, learners who are dissatisfied with the learning environment is when the services are less than what they expected or when the gap is too far between what they perceived and expected service quality. To measure the level of

learners' satisfaction, some factors will be analyzed employing the theory of Moore's Transactional Distance.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this conceptual paper study comprised of mixed-methods design; qualitative and quantitative methods involving focus group interviews and questionnaires. The sample involves in this study would be first-year learners undergoing English Proficiency 1 course in Universiti Utara Malaysia. Ten learners involved in focus group interviews whilst, 242 learners based on calculation will be involved in the survey.

For the semi-structured focus group interview, the interview questions consist of general questions related to learner satisfaction and factors affecting learners to be satisfied in an English course. The main reason for using the focus group interview is to design the questionnaire. Meanwhile, the 7- point Likert scale for questionnaire will be adopted and adapted from previous studies. The instrument consists of 5 parts; demographic profile (6 items), the interaction between learner to the instructor (8-items), learner to learner (8-items), learner to course materials (10-items) and learner satisfaction (8-items). The total items for the questionnaire would be 40 items. The Malay and English versions for both focus group interviews and questionnaires are used to avoid obscurity of questions or items.

The data collection for the focus group interview is done before the questionnaire distribution, which would begin on September 2019. For the analysis of the focus group interview, the responses from the videotape recorder will be later transcribed verbatim into MS Excel, translated into English version when there is the Malay language used, submitted for member checking and coded under similar themes categorized for the questionnaire. Meanwhile, in testing the hypotheses, the analysis data for questionnaires involve the use of IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS version 25.0) and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 3.0 software prior to determining the relationship among the variables.

3. RESULTS

The objective of this research is to examine the effectiveness of blended learning in the form of interaction factors with learners' satisfaction in the English Proficiency 1 course at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The targeted important factors in the questionnaire are the interaction between learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-course materials. While other factors from Moore's theory might influence learners' satisfaction such as course structure and learner autonomy, however, for the purpose of this study only the mentioned factors will be investigated, for the other factors lay outside of researcher control.

The researcher intended to examine the following research questions:

1. To what extent learners feel satisfied with the instructor in the blended learning English proficiency course?
2. To what extent learners feel satisfied with other learners in the same learning environment?
3. To what extent learners feel satisfied with course materials used in the course?

From the literature, several constructs for measuring learner satisfaction in a course have been identified. Figure 2 presents the researcher's proposed conceptual model. As shown in figure 2, it is hypothesized that three constructs (learner to instructor, learner to learner and learner to course materials) would determine learner satisfaction in learning English at the HEI which would have implication on learner English proficiency level. The three constructs are exogenous factors which can also be identified as the independent variables while learner satisfaction and English proficiency level, which are endogenous variables, can also be identified as the dependent variables. Moore's Transactional Distance Theory has formed the basis of this proposed conceptual model.

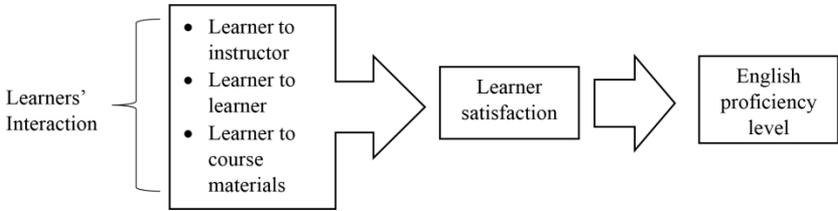


Figure 1: Conceptual model for measuring learners satisfaction in learning English

The three proposed research hypothesis is:

H1: Learner to instructor interaction has a significant relationship with learners' satisfaction in blended learning English proficiency courses.

H2: Learner to learner interaction has a significant relationship with learners' satisfaction in a blended learning English proficiency course.

H3: Learner to course materials interaction has a significant relationship with learners' satisfaction in blended learning English proficiency courses.

The Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) was proposed by Moore in 1993. TDT is defined as a psychological space and communication gap of misunderstanding that potentially occur between the instructor and learner when they are separated by space and/or time. This theory tried to minimize the gap to increase student understanding, outcome and satisfaction in all forms of education.

Accordingly, the overview of the relations among transactional distance scales and subscales in Figure 1 explains the variables and construct in the transactional distance with instructor and learner.

MOORE (1993) introduced the forms of the transactional theory into these three variables: course structure, interaction or dialogue (the term used by Moore) and learner autonomy. The course structure and interaction is related to procedures; while, autonomy relates to individual characteristics. The spectrum of more or fewer learners' perceived learning is determined by the relationship between these variables. From this understanding, it makes it clear that these three main variables are the key factors for the development of learners' satisfaction in learning.

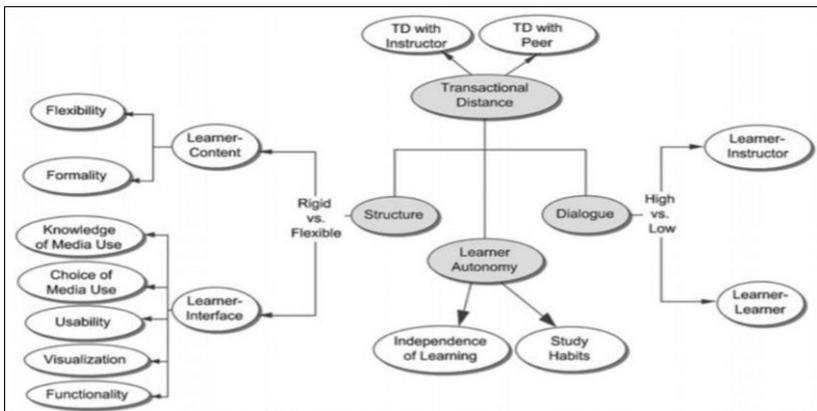


Figure 2: Overview of the relations among the transactional distance scales and subscales

Essentially, transactional distance is supposed to increase when the learner's autonomy and structure are superior or less interaction (EKWUNIFE-ORAKWUE & TENG, 2014). For instance, a course that has a rigidity structure can increase the sense of learner autonomy and decrease the quality of interaction between learners and

instructors. The interaction variable has been identified as the least controversial dimension EKWUNIFE-ORAKWUE & TENG (2014) and the main determinant of transactional distance (GOEL, ZHANG & TEMPLETON, 2012). Interaction can contribute to enhanced communication, improved teaching, and an increased learners' level of interest in the content. Thus, the interaction variable is under consideration in this study.

In theory, the interaction between learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-course materials are the factors involved in the learners' satisfaction. To define interaction, it refers to two-way interactions between learner and instructor as well as learner to learner in the Moore's earliest proposed work of transactional distance theory, however, then after the theory has been tested, Moore expanded the concept to three interactions which the learner's engagement with instructor, other learners and course content. The following sections give a very brief description of each type of interactions.

In the blended learning setting, an instructor conducts lessons face-to-face and provides online learning lessons to support learners on assignments or activities by giving feedback, replying to discussions or messages and clarifying information or instruction. The instructor is an important individual in the teaching and learning period through lectures, seminars, and activities in which this may be the reason why researchers reported that learner-instructor interaction to be the most researched component of transactional distance (MBWESA, 2014). Instructor-learner interaction was a significant predictor that impact on an outcome, such as perceived learning and student satisfaction

(LEWIS, 2011). However, this learner-instructor interaction has not given any impact on student grades.

MBWESA (2014) conducted research that resulted in a challenge facing teachers. Many of them begin teaching distance education without any training on how to effectively transfer courses to a digital environment. Researches have recommended the instructor to increase the frequency of interaction with learners, provide timely keeping appraisal of their performance and clear feedback MBWESA (2014) to influence the learners' satisfaction.

The learner also interacts with other learners since learning cannot be done alone and in isolation. In normal circumstances, the interaction among learners is connected through pair or group work. The interaction provides the opportunity for learners to form a semi-virtual social connection world and feel that they belong to a community (ABBAS, 2018). In the face to face class, the learners' discussion enriches the learners' learning experience. Meanwhile, in a fully online course, the instructor mostly acts as a facilitator between learner and technology. In the blended course, however, the instructor retains his traditional teaching role, such as preparing the teaching materials, grouping learners, and facilitating the learning environment.

Although HUANG, CHANDRA, DEPAOLO, CRIBBS & SIMMONS (2015) sought a study on learner-learner interaction found that perceived learner-learner transactional distance has a negative effect on the learning process and EKWUNIFE-ORAKWUE & TENG (2014) states that there is no conclusive evidence that student learning outcomes are impacted by learner-learner interaction, however, studies

have demonstrates that learner-learner interaction to be a significant predictor of perceived learning or satisfaction and there is a relationship between learner-learner interaction and student satisfaction (LEWIS, 2011). MOORE (1993) does not elaborate much on learner-course material interaction but acknowledged that overall content determines both the quality and quantity of interaction. It is also a vital type of learning activity and had a larger impact on student satisfaction than other types of interaction.

Learner to course materials interaction means that learners need to interact, digest and learn the course content that they receive from an expert. HOLMBERG (1986) refers to learner-course materials interaction as learners talk to themselves about the content. But in more interactive content, the interaction involves learners searching information relevant to their learning task in software, web application, or interacting with a virtual instructor. The design and development of course content in BL involve more than one technical form and different use of multimedia, which enhances the interactivity and effectiveness of interaction in comparison with using one learning approach.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to obtain more insights into the effectiveness of blended learning in terms of interaction and learners' satisfaction to improve on learners' proficiency level. Measuring satisfaction is

important to determine the strong and weak points of a course, including the instructor, administration, course designer and policymakers. Through satisfaction, it may direct learners to enjoy learning experience in a particular setting and impacts their decisions to remain in their field of study. Moreover, universities are paying serious attention to low satisfaction among learners because it may give universities a negative image and indirectly affect learners' enrolment to that particular university.

On the other hand, the blended learning experience is a unique approach with the combination of two approaches, which serves as an alternative for learners to learn in a combination way of face-to-face and online learning. This alternative way enhances the quality of learning and gives better exposure for learners to learn English. Furthermore, learners acknowledge the effectiveness of blended learning as it may be fostering the learners' independence in the process of learning that empowers them to carry out activity individually and be responsible for their learning.

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DEL ZULIA

opción

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales
Año 35, N° 24, (2019)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

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