

Evaluating the Effectiveness of E-Learning in Language Classrooms

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Abstract: In recent years, the technological explosion has greatly impacted the teaching and learning of English language courses at higher institutions of learning in Malaysia. As such, many English language teachers have attempted to integrate the usage of ICT in their lessons. The integration of ICT in English language classrooms, however must be thought of carefully and implemented wisely to ensure its effectiveness. Not only does it involve infrastructure and technology, the integration of ICT also involves a lot of other aspects; especially students, readiness, interest, apprehension level and competencies. Motivated by this current scenario, this study investigates students perceptions toward online quiz, suggested websites and language notes which are parked in the institution's website. This study is qualitative in nature where the respondents were interviewed to obtain information regarding their perceptions. The findings prove that the online quiz, suggested websites and language notes have helped them in improving their reading, writing and presentation skills. Nevertheless, some improvements need to be made to refine the language notes, suggested websites as well as the online quiz for the betterment of the blended course. Hence, the students' viewpoints on how the online quiz suggested websites and notes on language input could be improved are also highlighted in this present study. It is hoped that this study is able to provide better guidance towards achieving the objective of infusing ICT in language teaching and learning.

Key words: ICT, teaching and learning, online quiz, suggested websites, language notes

INTRODUCTION

To date, blended learning is already a buzzword in higher institutions in Malaysia. Blended learning refers to lessons which combine face to face instruction and online instruction (Graham, 2006). Online instruction can be carried out using electronic media such as mobile phones, video-conferencing and computers.

Many studies have proven that engaging students with blended learning yield positive results, especially for off campus students who could not attend traditional classes like the on campus students (Vaughan, 2007). As such, the adoption of internet technologies for distant learning purposes makes possible the change of the way it is delivered and improves interaction among participants in the educational process (Michail and Stamatios, 2008). However, one needs to ask what should be put into a language course which adopts a blended approach to ensure the course efficacy? Thus, this study is carried out to find the answer to this question.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research question: The major question for this study is what are the learners' perceptions towards the online quiz, suggested websites and language notes?

Research design: The research design employed by the researchers in this study is a case study. A case study was selected because the researcher aimed to conduct an intensive study of a specific group of people. This is in line with Merriam (2009)'s viewpoint. She defines a case study as a study which aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of a situation and a process rather than the outcome or product of the phenomena.

In a case study, a combination of research instruments should be used to corroborate the data evidence or to serve the purpose of triangulation (Merriam, 2009; Trochim, 2006). Thus in order to obtain the answers for the above mentioned research question, a questionnaire was given to the respondents. The data from the questionnaire is corroborated with the data from

the individual semi-structured interviews. In this study, the researcher employed purposive sampling which is generally used in case studies. Currently, the respondents are working in hospitals, clinics and municipal councils all over Malaysia. The data was arranged according to the respondents' pseudonyms namely; INTAM, INTRA, INTFARH, INTFA and INTLI. Pseudonyms were used in this study because the respondents' real names should not be revealed so as not to breach their privacy (Angrosino, 2000).

RESULTS

English for Life Sciences is a compulsory course for year 1 undergraduate students of Allied Sciences Faculty. This course has one main objective which is to prepare the students to read and comprehend their content subjects. Most of the references in Allied Sciences Faculty are in English and the lectures are also delivered in English.

This course employed a blended approach for distance learners. This study is conducted to facilitate course designers in preparing solid course materials and activities for a blended course. Thereby, it is important to elicit the distance learners' view towards the online quiz, the suggested websites and language notes. From the findings, the weaknesses could be identified and later be rectified.

Online quiz: INTFARH and INTLI viewed the online quiz as stressful because they worked alone to answer the questions "I feel pressured like I was in a competition. We need to think what to answer fearing that my answers are wrong. I do not mind if the quiz does not carry any marks and some of the questions are too long so I find them difficult to be understood". On the other hand, INTFA looked at it positively because she took the opportunity to discuss the answers with other course mates as they were not prohibited to discuss the answers with others "I could answer the online quiz. I discussed the answers with my friends as we were given time to answer the questions. Consequently, the answers are almost similar. I felt less stress when we discussed". The students had ample time to conduct discussions before they submitted their answers to the teacher via emails. Through the discussions, they worked collaboratively with a partner or group members to comprehend the given text in order to find answers for the quiz. The discussions managed to help them in reducing their stress level. As a result of the discussions, they were able to gain two benefits: Developing their communication skills and boosting their reading comprehension level as expressed by INTAM, "Our discussions boost our communication skills and

reading comprehension skill lah". The discussions enabled the students to complement each other's knowledge and to confirm their understanding. By gaining high level of assurance from the discussions, these students felt more confident to answer the questions in the quiz, thus, minimizing their stress. Furthermore, as the format of the quiz was very much similar to the final exam format, this activity prepared them for the final exam as well. Moreover, the quiz marks helped distribute the weight age of the total marks as it is a part of the ongoing evaluations. This statement is derived from INTRA's response, "In my opinion, quiz is a must in any course. First quiz helps to distribute the marks from final examination. Thus, it helps us to get better grade. The format which is similar to final exam helps to prepare us for the final exam. I rated it as 3. A course is not complete without a quiz".

Taking this into consideration, perhaps in the future, the teacher should inform the students to carry out a discussion prior to answering the quiz questions. Collaborative learning could yield positive learning outcomes, social skill development and self esteem (Tutty and Klein, 2008).

Suggested websites When the respondents were asked for their feedback regarding the suggested websites (refer to the following episodes) many of them felt that the websites are useful because the websites helped them to find answers for the online forum questions and helped to enhance their understanding of the topic discussed. The finding from this study mirrors Kasper (2003)'s view. He states that the internet technology and interactive hypermedia are effective tools for developing students' reading skills. Their knowledge on the topic was enriched, thus assisting them in developing better comprehension on the topic.

In the beginning of the study, two respondents were pretty reluctant to read hypermedia. These two respondents preferred to print the online articles prior to reading in order to ease their reading. Only after a few meetings with the researcher, they were able to realize the advantages of reading websites.

First through reading the suggested websites, they were exposed to the usage of hyperlinks even though sometimes, they did not manage to return to the main page after jumping to other websites using hyperlinks a few times.

Second, they need not go to the library to search and borrow books or buy books from a bookstore which are time consuming and costly. The access that the students have to these permanent materials and the possibility to have quick feedback and response from the teachers enable students to manage better their study time

(Tutunea *et al.*, 2009). The information could be retrieved for free from the Internet very quickly. Third, unlike reading from printed materials which require the students to write the information manually on a piece of paper to make copies, hypermedia reading eased their work as they could easily copy and paste some of the sentences straight away. Additionally, if they stumbled upon unfamiliar words, they could simply search for the meanings from the online dictionaries or thesaurus. Furthermore, some websites provide interface which enables the students to select the section which they prefer to read. That is, the students do not need to scan the whole article, thus accelerate their search for information. In addition, the students felt a sense of achievement their computer skills have improved. Finally, reading is more exciting due to the hypermedia presentations which include colourful pages, various font size and types, attractive illustrations and animated pictures.

Nevertheless, they viewed the number of suggested websites given in the module as insufficient and this led them to browse other related websites.

Episodes

INTAM: A sure I have if my interest level is very high, I will surf certain websites to find the answers. But the questions requested me to focus on Malaysia, so i need to browse other websites to find answers.

When it comes to reading technique, the advantages is for reading the websites. We could use the hyperlinks just click, click and click. We could always refer to online dictionaries which printed dictionary takes time access. Searching for books also time consuming. Searching for websites is much easier, we just sit in front of the computer and on the do the work is settled. We would take longer time if we use printed materials.

INTLI: Easy I just click at the interface, there's no need for me to read a lot. When I relate these websites to the main article, I have better understanding. Now I realize the importance of other websites, I do not have to read books anymore. I feel more exciting I just need to click to go to any desired websites. I feel my computer skills have improved a lot. Furthermore, my room is no longer messy since I could simply click. Free and faster. I do not have to bring books wherever I go anymore. The online dictionary also helps me a lot. I also learn to use hyperlinks.

INTFARH: Ok, actually mmm... because now-a-days is IT era. Now I'm more comfortable to get information from online from internet lah in comparison to books. We could find numerous information than from the books, more

complete information. It makes the reading process easier. In comparison to books, we can easily take the important sentences back using copy and paste. Using books, we could still do so but much slower. If we want to store the information, researchers can print the page. It is easier using online lah.

INTFA: A actually the difference between reading printed materials and hypermedia is I also like reading from hypermedia. If there're any words which I don't know the meaning I just clicked at the synonym and some related words will appear.

INTRA:

- There are certain words which I am sure what they mean so i refer to internet to a few websites
- I think using websites is much easier because it is more exciting than reading the traditional text. Reading traditional text is boring. For instance, the hypermedia' presentation changes. Colourful, different font and a lot more

Notes on language input: In examining how the language input could assist the students in learning the course (refer to the following episodes), three out of the five students rated the language input notes as two on the questionnaire scale which denotes the category very helpful. The only respondent who rated it as five (quite helpful) is the respondent who did not go through the notes on language input thoroughly due to her time constraint. Therefore, she could not see its significance to her learning. The others in the group could see the importance of the notes on the language input, especially if they could use the language expressions in their oral presentations group discussions and sentence constructions for evaluation purposes. These language input were seen as important since the usage is transparent and the activities in which the language input were used were evaluated. Simply put, the allocated marks are the students motivating factor. In addition, the dictionary skills enable the students to seek the meanings of bombastic words quickly and more effectively.

INTRA and INTAM claimed that the language input for sentence construction is important for many purposes, especially in constructing sentences to be posted in the online forum since they had more time to think, construct and revise the sentences "I refer to the notes and self check my sentences. My English is weak and I do not want my friends to laugh at my sentences and the students were able to go through the notes at their own pace and become autonomous learners, especially when they need to submit their views in the online forum".

It is important to note that the respondents suggested the facilitator to brief the students on the availability and the functions of the given language input notes and the prescribed websites on language notes. If the facilitator does not highlight on the functions most likely the students could not see the significance of these notes. Consequently, they had the tendency to ignore these notes (refer to the following episodes). The language notes are perceived more important to adult learners because they have forgotten a lot of grammar lessons. This is due to the fact that they have left school for many years.

Episodes

INTAM: Before this I'm not interested to read but after going through this study, I'm more interested to get more information about English and how to construct sentences.

INTLI: When I learn about the language input, I know more about how to make an oral presentation which I never know before this. Before this I only use any sentences that I feel comfortable with. I also learn on how to use language expressions for group discussions. I know how to make more appropriate and correct sentences.

INTFARH:

- The language input serves as guidelines to make better presentations
- I also learn on how to use the dictionary more effectively. It helps me, especially when I have to seek the meaning of high tech words
- I read the part on how to improve my grammar. From there, I know how to construct proper sentences

INTFA: I only explored the CD when I joined this study. Perhaps if I do not join this study, I would just throw away the CD. After going through the CD, I could discover more about the language input.

INTRA: My incapability to speak in English makes me use the notes to the fullest.

CONCLUSION

Generally, the respondents gave positive views toward the online quiz, the language notes and the suggested websites. However, a comprehensive training on hypermedia reading strategies should be given to the

students at the beginning of the course (Maslawati, 2010). It is to assist the students to access and then read the information in the hypermedia. The students should be briefed on the importance of the course input, such as the online quiz, language notes and the suggested websites. After the briefing, it is hoped that the students will value the designed materials and the evaluations more.

The activities and evaluations should be designed in such a way that the information in the language notes and the suggested websites could be applied to them. The activities and the evaluations should be on real-life activities, task-centred or problem centred. As reported by Rogers (2002), adult learners enter an educational activity with a life-centred, task-centred or problem-centred orientation to learning. To further elaborate, they do not learn for the sake of learning but to perform a task, to solve a problem or to lead a more satisfying life.

From the findings, it can be derived that the course is more interesting and more effective if there are more group discussion activities in the course. The students should be encouraged to conduct group discussions prior to attempting the online quiz. This process of learning which prompts the students to take successive steps in solving a problem and to construct new knowledge is known as scaffolding (Jordan *et al.*, 2008). Scaffolding is needed to recruit the students in completing their task. Another rationale is to motivate the students to read extensively, to share their knowledge and to aid each other's comprehension. Ultimately, their reading comprehension level is raised. In the beginning, they need to be guided closely and gradually the level of guidance is reduced until the students have become independent learners. Another rationale is to reduce the stress level when they attempt the online quiz individually. As the students are isolated from each other since they are scattered all over Malaysia, they should be taught to use asynchronous forum and synchronous forum as a platform for them to discuss their reading. The assistance of their peers through collaborative learning could result in the students attaining/acquiring new skills and reading strategies. Another suggestion is the students should be given the liberty to read about real situations particularly on topics that they have to deal with at their workplace. The next suggestion is the adult learners should be given the liberty to decide on the activities that they want to be involved. The course designers should take note that by not giving any options in terms of assignments and activities, adult learners will subconsciously feel resentful and resistant because they are not involved in the decision making process of their own learning (Knowles, 1984).

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