FACE-TO-FACE Vs ONLINE LEARNING: FACTORS INFLUENCING SUCCESS

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that ICT - information communication technologies - can enhance online teaching and learning processes. In the context of language learning, the effectiveness of ICT utilisation for the development of online courses has gained many opponents. They question whether students in online sections can reach the same learning outcomes as their peers in respective face-to-face sections. The current work is a theoretical framework that investigates the factors that should be taken into consideration in order for the online students of language courses to reach the same learning outcomes like students in the respective face-to-face sections. More specifically, the current research work is divided into two phases. Phase I presents an in-depth literature review on pedagogies of delivering courses in face-to-face vs. online mode of delivery and identifies the obstacles in the effective use of online language learning. Phase II is still in process. The authors intend to strengthen the current research through qualitative data with the involvement of students and lecturers.

Introduction and Theoretical Background

Online Learning

Effective online learning derives from information communication technologies (ICT) utilisation aiming to broaden educational opportunities for students. Individual online courses have been introduced to pave the way for distance learning programmes by adding various expansions, substitutions, or blending of new pedagogical approaches and technologies.

Research concerning online learning focuses mainly on the Internet as a supportive technology for learning rather than focusing on whether and how it actually enhances the learning process itself (Sweeney & Ingram 2001). Starr and Murray (2005) have argued in their work that the current evolutionary changes in educational technology and pedagogy as a teaching process will be evident in 50 years. This derives from the shift of the popular face-to-face courses using teacher-centered pedagogy to the not so widely used online and hybrid courses using digital technologies to support collaborative, student-centered pedagogy. In the same context, additional research is required to

determine the effectiveness and appropriateness of online learning as an educational delivery method (Arbaugh, 2000). Due to the diverse variables (technology tools used (hardware and software), pedagogies, students learning styles, instructor specificities, assessment methods) influencing the educational outcome, e.g., online or blended learning, it is difficult to control research in this area.

Online Language Learning
When it comes more specifically to teaching languages online, one can find even more opponents of online teaching. Opponents usually report that fundamental questions related to pedagogy are being neglected. How could online delivery benefit language learners most? Which are the mistakes to avoid? Which kind of knowledge and skills does the language lecturer need in order to be successful when s/he offers an online language course? What is the difference between teaching the language face-to-face and online in terms of pedagogical approach?

In her influential paper, Felix (2003, p.119) has identified six central statements made by opponents of online teaching:
- Administrators are interested only in saving costs and have little interest in the quality of any learning that is taking place.
- Online learning will replace classroom teaching.
- Teaching online will save time.
- Offering courses online will save staff.
- Students resent being taught online.
- It is not possible to teach as well online as in the classroom.

The statements are related to all stakeholders; the administration, the lecturers and the students alike. The author takes a critical look at these statements and considers them to be myths. The authors of the current work focus on the last statement, but at the same time, we understand that it is very difficult to separate it from all the other statements since they all seem to be interrelated.

There is no doubt that language courses are among the most challenging courses to be taught online effectively, if not the most challenging ones. This is especially true at lower levels where equal emphasis is usually given to the development of all four language skills (receptive skills, listening and reading and productive skills, speaking, and writing). They require, for example, more resources and those resources should be in a position to cover the complex networks of semantic and grammatical relations going on in a sentence. How can one cover, for example, the complexity of a relation between the auxiliary verb and the main verb in the case of an analytic tense (*present perfect* in English or *perfekt* in German) or of an analytic form of passive voice if the resources which your university makes available allow you to test only one item at a time in exercises such as multiple choice or matching and drag and drop exercises?

The constraints faced by learners and language lecturers have been also examined in numerous publications (e.g.,, Hauck & Stickler, 2006; Felix, 2003). From the perspective of language students, the absence of real speaking opportunities online and the limited feedback are seen as the most serious constraints of online teaching. In many cases, computer-supported collaborative learning is not taking place. Even the way students find themselves in an online language course might be a factor to consider. Felix claimed, "While students who persevere with online courses which they have chosen voluntarily usually cope well even with poor quality offerings, outright resentment can be seen where students have been forced into online ventures" (Felix 2003, p.123).   Many cases are known where universities close all face-to-face sections and keep only the online sections of even a conventional programme. Online delivery can be a conscious option for many students, but online delivery should always be a choice, not a must. From the perspective of language lecturers, the following constraints have been repeatedly identified:

- Very limited financial investment in appropriate equipment.
- The lack of teacher training in appropriate hardware and software (not just any software, but software that can really enhance language teaching and learning).
- Even more important, the lack of training in issues related to online teaching pedagogy.
- Very often, the same person plays a number of different roles (course writer, lecturer, researcher, administrator, trouble shooter).

The reasons for learning a language online are most probably not different from learning other subjects online. Most learners seem to choose online language courses because of the flexibility of time and space they offer. This has been proven also by the results of a recent survey conducted with students of the University of Nicosia (Papakyriakou & Ktoridou, 2014). If there are good reasons for online studies, why should we abandon the system all together then? Is it not possible just to improve the system?

Pedagogical Models
Online learning is mainly criticised for the technology tools used to support learning. Chiefly under criticism are those educational institutions that use the Web simply for uploading educational material, claiming that they offer online learning. Research by Ktoridou (2010) suggested that if you give students the technology they really need (communication, collaboration and sharing) you can enhance students' motivation and responsibility towards learning, build student-teacher relationships, promote active learning and finally achieve the development of critical thinking and problem solving skills.

In 2000, Mioduser, Tur-Kaspa, and Leitner, randomly evaluated 436 educational websites, finding that pedagogically, these online courses presented uploaded material from text books and multimedia CDs; an individual learning mode with almost no communication, collaboration, sharing and knowledge construction.

Gilly Salmon (2000, 2004) presented the following five-stage model for online, blended or immersed learning environments.

> Stage I: Access and Motivation
> Stage II: On-line socialisation
> Stage III: Information Exchange
> Stage IV: Knowledge Construction
> Stage V: Development

The main aim of every stage is to develop an appropriate and successfully pedagogical online learning environment for students where knowledge construction is achieved through the use of various innovative technologies. The model is based on constructivist pedagogic principles (Salmon, 2007), and through a framework it assists experienced face-to-face tutors to become online moderators. Online moderators played the role of the facilitator, supporting student engagement and learning in an entirely online course and enabling them to develop from beginners to autonomous online learners. The current model can be used to identify the typical activities instructors may be involved in at different stages of the students' learning processes.

The model of *community of inquiry* was also taken into consideration while developing the pedagogical framework. As Eteokleous and Ktoridou (2012), described in their work, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) developed a Community of Inquiry framework based on a constructivist and collaborative approach to teaching and learning. As described in Eteokleous and Ktoridou (2012), Garrison et al. (2000) were the pioneers to develop a community of inquiry framework based on a constructivist and collaborative approach to teaching and learning. Shea and Bidjerano (2010) suggested the community of inquiry (CoI) model that relates the social, the cognitive, and teaching presence. The CoI model supposes that effective online learning requires the development of a community that supports meaningful inquiry and learning (Shea, 2006).

The model outlines theoretical elements essential to successful knowledge construction in collaborative online environments. The social presence relates to the establishment of a supportive environment and its elements are demonstrated through emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion. The teaching presence involves the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes and its elements include setting curriculum and activities, shaping constructive discourse, and focusing and resolving issues. The cognitive presence is the level to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through continuous suggestion and discussion in a critical CoI. The elements of cognitive presence include the following: triggering event (sense of puzzlement), exploration (sharing information and ideas), integration (connecting ideas), and resolution (synthesizing and applying new ideas) (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Swan et al, 2008).

Finally, the model of Makrakis and Costoulas-Makrakis (2012), *ExConTra*, is driven by a learning paradigm that merges three learning theories: experiential,

constructivist and transformative. Specifically the model uses a four-step online course design methodology: needs analysis, curriculum design, development and formative evaluation.

Face-to-Face, Online Language Learning: Comparison as it Appears in Current Literature
Currently there is not much research on actually comparing face-to-face and online learning. In this context, evidence from Brennan, McFadden and Law (2001), which is considered significant in the area, reveals that outcomes achieved using face-to-face and online learning are no less than the same. Further, there is a evidence that enhanced learning outcomes are enhanced and enriched through the use of technology.

In one study of graduate-level teachers, Herman and Banister (2007) evaluated the learning outcomes of the transformation of a face-to-face model to online delivery and reported that the process has been successful since an online course proved to be beneficial by engaging students in the learning process and reaching strong student learning outcomes. More specifically, the innovative course design for online delivery involved the development of various interactive multimedia modules. It is significant to note that student work and assignments were analysed and compared from both the face-to-face and online versions of the course to determine academic quality and learning outcomes. Finally, faculty members have committed to continue collaboration in the design of more online courses.

In another study, Jaggars (2014) discussed community college students' experiences with online and face-to-face learning, as well as their reasons for selecting online versus face-to-face sections of specific courses. Reports from students showed that online courses had reduced teacher explanation and interaction and that they actually needed to "teach themselves" in these courses. Interestingly, the majority of students had chosen to take only "easy" academic subjects online; they preferred to take "difficult" or "important" subjects face-to-face. Finally, the research suggested to colleges to avoid restricting the availability of face-to-face course sections, particularly in academically challenging or advanced areas of study.

Beerman (1996) conducted a study comparing face-to-face and online learning by hypothesizing that test scores of students whose lectures were augmented with computer based multimedia would increase, as technology would enhance interactive learning, critical thinking and application of knowledge. More specifically, for two years, students were taught with traditional lectures, and for another two following years the lectures were delivered to students combined with computer based multimedia. In addition, Beerman compared overall test scores of an introductory nutritional science course and final grade distributions. The findings of the study indicated that overall means differed significantly across years for the two modes of learning with students taught with multimedia having significantly higher test scores.

Schutte (1996) conducted a randomised controlled study of online versus face-to-face learning in a sociology class. Specifically, a class of 33 students was randomly split into two groups with one group receiving weekly instruction in a classroom environment and the other being instructed through computer mediated technology. Both groups studied the same course content, were offered the same midterm and final examinations and were taught by the same instructor. Classroom students submitted tasks and assignments weekly, whereas students taking the computer-mediated course had discussions, peer collaboration activities, problem-based assignments and weekly synchronous discussions with the lecturer again on a weekly basis. The research showed that students in the computer mediated course significantly outperformed on the midterm and final examination, in comparison to their classmates studying in a classroom environment. According to the researchers, the cause to this significant difference was the online collaboration and the sharing and networking of ideas between and amongst students.

Ladyshewsky (2004) in his work provided assurance that student performance can be at least as good as, if not slightly better, in online learning mode when compared to face-to-face delivery. His findings are reliable compared to other studies reporting differences in learning outcomes between face-to-face and online delivery modes. Finally, he suggested that for positive educational outcomes to be achieved by students the following factors should be met: pedagogical issues should be taken under serious consideration for the design and delivery of online learning modes and online learning must be sufficiently supported by resources.

Conclusions and Recommendation

There are poor quality online ventures, but at the same time there are also examples of good practice. Online language teaching can be excellent or poor, exactly as classroom language teaching can be. Lecturers of online language courses can be extremely dedicated and engaging or boring, just as lecturers of conventional forms of delivery can be.   Examples of good practice should be indentified and used as a model. It is important for all stakeholders to understand what it takes to teach languages online and to offer language professionals the necessary tools for effective instruction. For this to happen, language professionals should be included in decision-making when it comes to finalising policies and purchasing equipment. In some cases, even the development of in-house software applications might be necessary, and for this to happen, financial support will be needed. Other factors influencing success that have been identified in this article are related to the lecturers. The quality and engagement of lecturers make up one of the most important success factors. Lecturers should be offered regular training in appropriate hardware and software, but above all they should be offered training in issues related to online language teaching pedagogy. For online language teaching and learning to be successful, more emphasis should be given to real speaking opportunities and feedback.

Collaborative learning should not be neglected in a computer-enhanced learning environment. A commitment to quality education from all stakeholders is important for the project online language teaching to be successful. Otherwise, the aim of Europe to become the most competitive, knowledge-based society will remain just a dream. In the same line, the authors encourage educational institutions and individual lecturers to utilise the findings of this research and eliminate the obstacles of online learning.

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