

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE COURSES OFFERED FULLY ONLINE OR THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

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Abstract

As a response to continuous changes in the needs of the learners, institutions of tertiary education offer multiple types of online programmes, including also language programmes. The rash to develop such online programmes without examining the perceptions of the learners, as one of the main stakeholders, may lead to failure. Is the choice of the specific type of distance learning motivated? Is there a rationale behind the decision of the institutions? Do universities conduct any kind of research prior to offering any type of online language courses? The current research project is divided into two phases. The results of Phase I are presented in this work. After a review of previous studies on the topic, the article presents the results of a survey on language courses which were offered fully online throughout four semesters at the University of Nicosia. Phase II of this project will be carried out next academic year and will focus on language courses offered through blended learning. The results of the two phases will be compared and recommendations regarding the course design will be made.

Introduction and Theoretical Background

Before analysing the data of the survey that was conducted at the University of Nicosia, it is important to clarify few definitions in the area of online education right at the beginning.

Defining E-learning Courses and Blended Learning

The University of Nicosia uses the term e-learning course for any course that is offered fully online. Whereas the term e-learning course, or any equivalents at other universities, might be clear, the same does not seem to be the case with blended. Which are the features of a course that make it a course offered through blended learning (BL)? Neumeier (2005) defined BL as “a combination of face-to-face (F2F) and computer assisted learning (CAL) in a single teaching and learning environment” (p.164). In a similar way, Trinder (2012, p.1) defined BL as “a combination of face-to-face and online learning, with usually one of the two functioning as a lead mode.” When do educators opt for this mode of delivery? Educators might use BL as an intermediate step before turning a course into a fully online course when they are not experienced yet, but in most cases, this is a conscious decision because they consider this mode as the most appropriate one in a specific context. The most challenging task is then to decide what is the most effective combination of BL sessions and F2F sessions (which portion of content

to be delivered through which mode, in which order, what content is delivered more effectively in which mode, etc.). This challenging task should take the nature of the course, the course objectives, the stakeholders (attitudes and skills of the lecturer and the students) as well as the existing infrastructure into consideration.

Literature Review

Findings from studies regarding students' perceptions of computer-enhanced language learning are contradictory. Stepp-Greany (2002) conducted a survey with 358 learners of Spanish at Florida State University who were taking three hours of face-to-face instruction, one hour of a traditional audio-video lab and one hour of computer lab. Only 48% of those students would choose a class with a CALL component over a regular one. In addition, 89% agreed or strongly agreed that the presence of the lecturer was important for the success of the CALL component. Stracke (2007) investigated through interviews the reasons why students had chosen to drop L2 courses (French and Spanish) with a technology component. She found out that students decided to drop those courses mainly because of lack of instructor support and print material as well as failure to see a connection between face-to-face instruction and CALL. Sagarra and Zapata (2008) investigated the effect of using an online workbook on 245 learners of Spanish over two consecutive semesters, using quantitative and qualitative methods through course tests and questionnaires on student perceptions. Students participated in the study in exchange of extra credit. A high percentage of students agreed that the online homework helped them learn Spanish. One-third of the learners moderately agreed that their listening (30.5%), pronunciation (34.44 %) and reading skills (34.5%) in Spanish had improved through the online activities, and 66.1% of the learners agreed and somewhat agreed that their grammatical and lexical knowledge was improved through the online activities. Nevertheless, the percentage of students who thought that the online activities made the course more attractive was much higher (74.2%). At the same time though, less than half (43.4%) enjoyed the CALL component, which sounds like a paradox. The author explains this paradox with the fact that students found the CALL component more time-consuming and labor intensive. Also, about two-thirds (66.4 %) reported that they would take another Spanish course with an online workbook. This indicates that the overall experience with a CALL component was positive.

Distance Learning at the University of Nicosia

Tools Used at UNic

Literature reveals evidence that appropriate use of technology may improve teaching and learning processes. Effective use of technology and more specifically incorporating projects and services of the Web 2.0 family enable information and resource sharing, communication, and collaboration (Eteokleous & Ktoridou, 2011). The new Web-based settings, applications and capabilities allow higher educational institutions to offer local and international students the same academic resources and access to content and faculty as conventional

students on campus. The rising question is: Does the online student share the same experiences as the conventional student? When a student takes an online course, he/she has the benefits of flexibility, convenience and accessibility, and depending on the course, he/she is able to complete assignments and have a synchronous participation in lectures and class discussions ubiquitously. In addition, students with disabilities or mobility problems can benefit from the convenience of their home setting.

In this context, the University of Nicosia is using the latest trends of technology and state-of-the-art learning design theory to offer distance learning programs as well as support learners in building knowledge engaging them in a collaborative and social learning.

During fall 2007, the University of Nicosia started its online learning activities by offering 7 courses in LAMS (Learning Activity Management System Server). In the Fall 2013 semester over 40 different e-learning courses were delivered through LAMS and Moodle (a Learning Management System used to create dynamic websites for course delivery), and in Spring 2014, 52 e-learning courses. The university offers also eight fully online programmes (distance learning programmes), which will not be considered in this work.

Every course of a programme offered through Distance Learning incorporates also three teleconferences using WebEx – Cisco’s video conferencing system. Lecturers can share their computer screen so that students can see the presentation material in a synchronous way. At the end of these sessions, the recorded lesson is uploaded for students who couldn’t attend the virtual class and can be viewed asynchronously.

Finally, at the beginning of 2013, the “UNIC App” was released – the first in-house mobile application for the university. The app distributes useful university-related information to students and faculty and is available through Google Play, Windows Store and Apple App Store (<http://www.unic.ac.cy/distance-learning/about-distance-learning>).

Language Courses Offered as E-learning Courses at UNic

As far as languages are concerned, the number of classes offered as e-learning courses in the last two years has grown from three in Spring Semester 2012 to six in Fall Semester 2012, seven in Spring Semester 2013 and eight in Fall Semester 2013 (see Table 1).

Table 1

List of E-learning Courses Included in the Survey

| Fall 2013 | Spring 2013 | Fall 2012 | Spring 2012 |
|--------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| GERM-101(02) | GERM-101(01) | GERM-101(02) | GERM-101(01) |
| GERM-102(01) | | GERM-102(01) | |
| ENGL-100(09) | ENGL-100(07) | | |
| ENGL-101(09) | ENGL-101(09) | ENGL-101(03) | ENGL-101(08) |
| BADM-231(05) | BADM-231(04) | BADM-231(05) & BADM-231(06) | BADM-231(06) |
| BADM-332(04) | BADM-332(05) | | |
| COMM-200(07) | COMM-200(07) | | |
| ESP-110N(01) | ESP-110N(01) | ESP-110N(02) | |

Research Methodology

For the purposes of this work, a quantitative approach for the data collection was deployed (Creswell, 2003). Online questionnaires were designed and articulated to the participants using Google Forms - a flexible form and survey development interface with built-in reporting. The specific versatile data collection framework was employed, as it was easy to invite students to participate and answer the questions from almost any web browser - including mobile smartphone and tablet browsers (Wolber, 2012).

The study's target population consisted of 318 students coming from the University of Nicosia enrolled in the following language courses throughout four semesters (Fall 2012, Spring 2013, Fall 2013, Spring 2014):

- GERM-101 German Language and Culture I
- GERM-102 German Language and Culture II
- BADM-231 Business Communications
- BADM-332 Technical Writing and Research
- COMM-200 Business & Professional Communication (a public speaking course)
- ENGL-100 Basic Writing
- ENGL-101 English Composition (an academic writing course)
- ESP-110N English for Nursing II

Specifically, 50 students were chosen randomly and were offered the questionnaire via e-mail. The response rate was 70% (35 responses). The questionnaire consisted of two sections. *Part A* collected students' demographic characteristics. *Part B* obtained the following information:

1. Students' reason for registering in an e-learning section
2. How much of the online material the students studied

3. Students' time commitment (time accessing the material and hours spend online)
4. Type of activities students engaged in regularly
5. Technical problems that students faced
6. Students' preferences on full or blended distance learning
7. Whether students would recommend this type of delivery to other student
8. What students consider advantages of this mode of delivery for the specific class
9. What students consider disadvantages of this mode of delivery for the specific class
10. What students would like to see improved in their course
11. Which areas of the language system students believe they have developed more through their course

Data Analysis

In this part, we will analyse the survey data. Following a short presentation of the demographic characteristics, we will focus on the results of the main part of the questionnaire. Most results will be presented through a summary report. Since it was felt that the nature of the courses should be taken into consideration in order for the results of at least some of the questions to be interpreted correctly, some of the aspects were analysed for every course separately.

Demographic Characteristics

Regarding the gender of the students, 16 (46%) were male and 19 (54%) were female, while students' major of study varies. Specifically, the majority (5) were students of Computer Science. The highest percentage of students' course selection was related to BADM-332 (Technical Writing and Research, 9 responses, 26%). Most participants in this survey were students from Fall Semester 2013 (60%), followed by students from Spring Semester 2013 (31%). In the two previous semesters, the percentage was significantly lower. That shows most probably that in future, the survey should be conducted immediately after the completion of the course so as to secure a higher participation rate.

Questionnaire Main Part

Most students gave the distance between their house and the university as the reason for registering in an e-learning course (10 responses), followed by students who have chosen the e-learning sections because they have a full-time job (8). Only 2 students have chosen the e-learning section consciously because they believe that e-sections are better.

Two important questions were related to how much of the online material students studied and how much time per week they spent working on the online material. New systems can provide this information to the lecturer through the information

management software. Continuous monitoring of these two factors is necessary. Only 17 students studied all the material (49%), 8 studied about 2/3 (23%), 5 studied only half of the material (14%) and another 5 (14%) studied one fourth. The majority of the participants spent about two hours per week studying the material (18 responses, 51%), followed by students who spent only one hour (8 responses, 23%). Seven students spent three hours (20%), and only two students spent more than four hours per week (6%). It would be more interesting to analyse the results for every course separately, but in general, the amount of hours spent per week seems to be low. Although BADM-332 was the course with the highest participation rate in the survey, ENGL-101 was the course for which students spent the highest percentage of study hours per week (including both students who spent more than 4 hours per week).

As far as the technical site is concerned, the results are encouraging. The vast majority of participants didn't face any problems at all (66%). Only 7% of the students reported about a slow internet connection at home, another 7% of the students reported about their computer being old, and another 7% of the students about inappropriate learning conditions at home. What is encouraging above all is that only 1% of the students faced difficulties with the online material because of limited computer skills: 10% of the students faced other problems.

The results as to (a) which mode of delivery students consider the most appropriate one from the perspective of the learner for the specific course and (b) whether they would recommend the type they have chosen to other students seem to be contradictory. The highest percentage of students considered the blended learning mode as the most appropriate one (22 responses, 63%), followed by only face-to-face instruction (9 responses, 26%) and e-learning courses (4 responses, 11%). With this picture, someone would expect that students wouldn't recommend other students to choose the mode of delivery that they have chosen. Nevertheless, 30 students recommended the mode of delivery of their course (e-learning course, 86%), and 5 students didn't recommend it (14%).

Students expressed also an opinion about what they see as advantages or disadvantages of the course they have taken (e-learning courses). Sixteen (16) students (31%) see the interaction with the lecturer as an advantage. This response can be explained through the specific features of e-learning. It has been noted many times in literature that in e-learning courses students feel free to interact more often with their lecturer since they know that nobody else is listening. Twelve (12) students find e-learning courses more engaging (23%). Most students reported that their e-learning course had no disadvantages (18 students, 46%), but also a quite high percentage of students see the limited interaction with peers as a disadvantage (8 responses, 21%). As to what students would like to see improved in their respective course, several students asked for more practice and more interaction with peers and also with the lecturer. Also comments related to the software were included, like "Personally, I would like a

better and more entertaining software to be used with more aesthetically pleasing framework and a little less mundane vocal tonality” (student of BADM-332). The results of the last questions should be interpreted for every course separately since they are directly linked to the pre-defined course objectives and the course content. Students were asked to identify the language skills and the areas of the language system that they developed more through the e-learning course. Although only real assessment tools can provide specific results in this area, the responses to this question can still give us an indication on how students see their progress and whether this projection of the students matches the pre-defined course objectives. In most cases, students’ responses were in general appropriate and consistent. They were in agreement with the pre-defined course objectives. Nevertheless, we also had very few mismatches. The most extreme one is the case of COMM-200 where two students (out of four) defined grammar as the area they developed more, although this course is a public speaking course, something that the course title might not indicate clearly. This course does not focus on grammar.

The last question that should be analysed for every course separately is in which type of activities students were engaging in regularly. Nevertheless, since this task would need an analysis of more complex factors, the authors decided to use for the purpose of this paper the summary results and to offer a separate analysis for every course at a later stage. See Table 2 for the summary results.

Table 2

Type of Activities Students Were Engaging in Regularly

| Activities | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Exercises where you complete the task alone: Multiple choice exercises, fill in the gap exercised, drag and drop etc | 26, 16% |
| Forum with the participation of my lecturer and fellow students | 17, 11% |
| Chat with the participation of my lecturer and fellow students | 12, 8% |
| Work on a specific task (Watch a video, read a text etc.) and submit a written response | 25, 16% |
| Work on a specific task (Watch a video, read a text etc.) and submit an oral response (record your own voice) | 7, 4% |
| Build dialogues with my fellow students as partners | 3, 2% |
| Listen to recordings and submit a response | 16, 10% |
| Write texts and send them to my fellow students | 6, 4% |
| Write texts and send them to my lecturer | 16, 10% |
| Receive feedback from my fellow students in writing | 6, 4% |
| Listen to recorded power point presentations | 23, 14% |
| None of the above | 2, 1% |

Here we can see that the activities that have to do with interaction with peers receive a low percentage, and students are quite consistent in their judgment. These results are in agreement with what the majority of the students considers disadvantages of the courses. They are also in agreement with the recommendations of the students as to which aspects they would like to see improved.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several encouraging findings came out of this research. Now we know for example that our students are well equipped and in general don't face any technical problems. We have also identified several aspects that should be of concern to educators and also some that should be considered in the fine-tuning of the courses. For example, students in online courses spent on average two hours per week studying the material (in some classes even less), whereas F2F students spent three hours in class. Especially important is the fact that only 49% of students reported studying all the material. Another important finding is that the highest percentage of students considered the blended learning mode as the most appropriate one (22 responses, 63%), although they were all registered in an e-learning course (fully online). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the percentage for BL was higher than for F2F courses, which may indicate that students appreciate technology. It became clear that students missed more interaction with the lecturer and above all with their peers. Many of the findings can be explained by the fact that online teaching doesn't have a long tradition at the University of Nicosia. Taking that into consideration, we believe that the findings are rather encouraging. Students need time to adjust to the new style of learning and to understand what it takes to attend an online course. Students (and their lecturers) need to develop a "technology study culture." We hope that the current work might shed some light on students' involvement in online courses and contribute to the improvement of online education.

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