Student Engagement in Online Language Learning: A Case Study Examining the Online Delivery of Tertiary Language Courses

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Abstract: Since information communication technology has became broadly and easily available to the general public over the past decade, more and more educational institutions are offering online delivery of courses. The flexibility available with regard to time and place of study is the key attraction of online delivery, enabling a more diverse cohort of students to study university courses. It has been observed, however, that student retention rates and levels of engagement in courses are comparatively lower for online courses than for the same courses offered face-to-face. This study examines the pedagogical tools available for online delivery, such as discussion boards, voice recording tools, online quizzes and the recording of face-to-face classes on campus. The data for this case study is obtained from student comments taken from course evaluation surveys and individual student performances. It reveals how these on-line delivery tools are perceived by students and regarded as effective supporting tools for keeping them motivated and engaged in learning, as well as enabling them to feel like part of the learning community.

Introduction

T**HE DISTANCE LEARNING** of foreign languages has changed in response to the emergence of information and communication technology (ICT). The introduction of ICT has allowed greater 'flexibility' with regard to time and place to study courses offered by tertiary institutions. 'Flexibility' has been a buzz word attracting many potential learners to tertiary institutions. It has opened the door to study opportunities for a group of people who otherwise would have had to give up their dreams of obtaining a higher education. These people were physically restricted from attending courses by such factors as work or family commitments. The introduction of ICT has also changed the dimensions of distance learning of foreign languages. Before the technology was available, there were not many opportunities enabling the interaction between students and teachers, or among students themselves. In the absence of ICT, the option of face-to-face learning often resulted in students experiencing a sense of isolation and a loss of motivation. Today, ICT has provided computer-mediated communication (CMC) which offers interactive learning opportunities to improve students' oral-aural skills. Another new dimension to learning emerging at tertiary institutions during recent years is the introduction of web-based lecture technologies (WBLT), blurring the line between face-to-face and distance learning. Continuously changing institutional contexts, such as financial and administrative restructuring, has also caused unavoidable influences on the forms of administering distance education. With

these changing circumstances surrounding distance education, it is necessary to gain more knowledge pertaining to how students undertaking distance learning of a foreign language perceive the use of ICT, and how effectively the technology can be utilized for this type of learning. It is also important to know how the use of ICT, including CMC and WBLT, influence teaching methods and the curriculum. This paper investigates these issues using a small-scale case study involving distance learning of a foreign language using ICT, in particular CMC and WBLT, through a student survey and course observation for one semester at a tertiary institution.

Distance Learning of Foreign Languages and ICT

The learning of foreign languages through distance learning has always presented many challenges. In learning a foreign language, students need to learn the language systems, including pronunciation, writing, grammar and structure, as well as acquire language skills comprising the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Through learning these skills, intercultural understanding of a target culture and one's own culture can be developed, and a greater awareness of one's own culture and pragmatic communication skills of a target culture also needs to be learned. Some of these skills can be acquired through self-study, where students study on their own, while other skills need to be learned through the experience of interacting with other people along with the guidance of a teacher. In regard to distance education, in the past the learning of a foreign language was primarily achieved using provided textbooks, course notes, study guides and exercise books, with audio-supporting materials also supplied. To compensate for the lack of experience in interaction, activities such as telephone conversations, speech and interviews were tools for facilitating students' improvement of these skills.

After the introduction of ICT into the field of education, and with the continuously fast-growing and expanding improvement of tools and software over the last two decades, computer mediated communication (CMC) is now widely available, bringing with it the benefits of tools such as email, discussion boards, voice email, voice boards, Skype, virtual live classrooms and so on. As well as CMC, assessment tasks and quizzes can be managed using computers. These are incorporated and managed as web communication tools, such as Web CT and Blackboard, and used as a course management system. There are many studies showing the achievements made through the use of ICT. Research concerning the effect of CMC on oral proficiency suggests that its use can develop the oral proficiency of second-language learners (Payne and Whitney 2002). In their experimental study, students using CMC were found to be more aware of one another's sentence structure and produced more utterances compared to those engaged in face-to-face interaction. It has been claimed that CMC could provide more opportunities for language learners to improve syntactic processing as, due to its slower speed, these students tend to produce more full-length sentences than those involved in face-to-face communication.

Changes in Distance Education and WBLT

The use of web-based lecture technologies has become popular among many universities. This technology involves the recording of lectures and tutorials conducted face-to-face. This is then uploaded to the unit website for access by all students. As a result, students who miss

classes can access the posted recordings on the site and gather information on the classes. The recordings are often accompanied by slides (usually presented in power point). In recent years, extensive studies regarding the use of WBLT have been conducted (Woo et al. 2008; Phillips et al. 2004). The use of WBLT blurs the boundaries between face-to-face and distance learning. These days, internal students also make use of WBLT, benefiting from it when they miss lectures and tutorials, or for the purpose of revision. This shifts the focus of flexibility in the delivery of unit material to that of student accessibility, and make us rethink the flexibility of learning in a distributed learning environment (Phillips et al. 2004).

Issues of Distance Learning

The low retention rate of distance learning students remains an issue, even after the introduction of ICT. It was once expected that the use of ICT could improve the retention rates for distance learning; however many studies have found that the drop-out rates for distance e-learning courses at higher education institutions remain much higher than those for on-campus courses (Dreyer, Bangeni, and Nel 2005). These studies propose that a framework is necessary to support distance learning students, through the gathering of detailed profiles on each student to gain information in terms of their strengths, weaknesses and needs. In her paper, Galusha (1997) enumerates several barriers to distance education learning, including financial, family and work-related issues, a student's sense of isolation and the lack of support in academic, technical and administrative assistance.

The changing student cohort also shows the necessity of more research to improve distance education and the use of ICT. According to the statistics pertaining to 'Students 2007'(Australian Government 2007), 80 percent of students engaged in higher education study internally by means of attending lectures and tutorials on campus, while approximately 20 percent undertake units or courses externally, either fully or partly. These are the students for whom the door has been opened, as previously they could not attend classes on campus. Many of these external students have full-time jobs or family commitments. Some of them study mainly internally and take one or a few units/subjects available externally due to their commitments to part-time jobs. This allows them to limit their days on campus and to avoid timetable clashes, thereby securing their employment. Based on the same statistics above, the percentage of full-time students is 68 percent. This means that 1 in 3 students is engaged in part-time higher education studies and has a full-time or part-time job or other commitments.

Institutional Context of this Study

Many tertiary institutions offering distance education have been experiencing continuous changes, such as institutional restructuring, reviews of distance education and reviews of degree programs. Some institutions, such as Murdoch University, have experienced budget cuts in the area of distance education, and the introduction of WBLT has created a new approach allowing the flexibility to compensate for it (Phillips et al. 2004). At four Australian universities, the use of WBLT has been encouraged in all units, and a study was conducted concerning this. The study indicated that three quarters of students found the overall experience to be a positive one, regardless of their mode of study (Woo et al. 2008).

This study was conducted at one of these four universities, where WBLT has been implemented for all of the units. At this university, both internal and external modes of study are offered to students through different administrations. The internal mode of study refers to students who attend lectures and tutorials on campus, that is, face-to-face learning. Students who register themselves in the external mode of study do not attend lectures and tutorials on campus, but participate in them through listening to recorded lectures and tutorials and using study materials provided in advance. The recorded lectures and tutorials provided through WBLT are accessible by all students, regardless of their study mode. In relation to the unit study requirements, tasks, activities and assessments, the cohort of internal and external students is dealt with in the same way. There is no differentiation between the modes of study with regard to assessment requirements and weightings. As a result, an effort is made in the curriculum to ensure there are no resulting disadvantages, and to warrant fairness in the assessment of students engaged in the external mode of study.

During this study, the realisation of another issue arose, pertaining to the workloads of teaching staff members. At the university where this study was conducted, there used to be a special arrangement and consideration for teachers of distance units, to cater for their diverse needs, such as the recognition of their teaching loads. However, with the recent institutional changes, together with the introduction of WBLT and the subsequent blurring of the differences between distance learning and face-to-face learning, the recognition of the varied workloads of staff teaching internally and externally no longer exists.

Research Questions in this Study

As shown above, there have been several studies conducted in relation to CMC and WBLT, but not many involving the distance learning of a foreign language in the context of a combined curriculum in tertiary education.

Therefore, in this small-scale case study the following questions are explored:

1. How are the teaching and learning of a foreign language through distance education, under the conditions for which minimal special care is provided, and involving combined units from both internal and external modes of study, viewed?
2. How do students studying foreign languages through distance education by way of combined study modes perceive and evaluate the use of CMC and WBLT?

The Study

This study was conducted for one 13 week semester, and involved upper-beginner and intermediate level Japanese language units at a tertiary institution. These units are offered both internally and externally. Students of both modes studied the same curriculum using the same textbook and resources. Small adjustments for assessment tasks and methods of feedback were made due to the different modes of unit delivery. In upper-beginner level, there were 7 students registered for the external mode, and 3 for the intermediate level units. For each unit, the percentage of external students among all students was less than 10 percent.

Teaching Format, Tasks, Assessments and Feedback for Each Mode

The format of each unit consisted of lectures and tutorials. Lectures were held in a large room, while tutorials were held in smaller class for a small number of students. In upper-beginner level units, two lectures and three tutorials were offered, while for intermediate level units, one lecture and two tutorial classes were offered. In lecture classes, more teacher-centred lesson were conducted, while during tutorials there were more opportunities provided to students for interaction and activities.

The same tasks, comprising practical activities and tasks for assessment purposes, were provided to students engaged in both modes. Both lectures and tutorials were recorded using WBLT and uploaded to a password-protected unit website before the end of the day. Any materials used during lectures and tutorials, such as power point slides, were uploaded to the same password-protected website for access by all students so that they could listen to recorded lectures or tutorials with accompanied visual materials and documents.

All tasks performed for both practice sessions and assessments are shown in the following table:

Table 1: List of Tasks Conducted for both Internal and External Students

Task	Internal Class	External Class
listening practice	teachers talk in Japanese comprehension practice	teachers talk in Japanese; recorded using WBLT comprehension practice accessible from the library
writing practice	weekly writing activity in class → in-class check	weekly writing activity on the web → self-check
reading practice	comprehension practice in class	comprehension practice in class; recorded using WBLT
speaking practice	reading dialogue pair work / role play recording chapter dialogues to Wimba Voice Board	self-practice recording pair work / role play to Wimba Voice Board recording chapter dialogues to Wimba Voice Board
listening assessment	listening assessment tasks online via the unit website	listening assessment tasks online via the unit website
writing assessment	writing assessment tasks in class	writing assessment tasks delivered online
reading assessment	reading assessment tasks online via the unit website	reading assessment tasks online via the unit website
speaking assessment	speaking assessment tasks in class	speaking assessment tasks either in class or using Voice Board / Skype

The same staff members taught all students undertaking internal and external modes. As summarised in the table above, practice and assessment tasks for receptive and comprehension

skills were conducted via online delivery through the unit website. The writing practices and assessments were administered in class for internal students, and online for external students. In this case, external students downloaded the task, printed it out to complete within a limited time, then scanned it into the computer and send it back online. This process was necessary because the practice of hand writing characters is an important part of the acquisition of the Japanese writing system. In this case, the limited time span given for this task did not allow external students to have as much flexibility as they did when undertaking other practices and tasks. Speaking practice and assessment tasks were organized using the Wimba Voice Board and Skype. The Wimba Voice Board is an asynchronous audio communication tool implemented in the unit website. Students can record their comments and speeches for tasks and respond to other students' voice postings. Skype is a synchronous voice communication tool available free via the internet. It was used for a final assessment task which involved performing a skit among a group.

The feedback for listening and reading comprehension tasks was provided via automatic feedback at the unit website. For productive and output tasks, feedback was provided in the form of general comments as well as individual feedback and comments for each student.

Correspondence with External Students

All correspondence by external students was conducted via email. A weekly study guide provided exclusively to external students was sent to the external student discussion board. It included personalized messages from the teaching staff members and step by step instructions for procedures for practice and assessment tasks, especially with regard to using ICT.

Unit Evaluation Survey

A Unit Evaluation Survey was used for this study. This survey was anonymous and voluntary, and is a regular practice used for evaluation of the unit at the institution where this study was performed. It was available on the unit website for two weeks until the end of the semester. Students were invited to participate in the survey in order to help to improve the unit. It consisted of the following 5 open-ended questions (for this study, although question number 6 was especially used to explore students' perceptions of the use of ICT, the answers to other questions are also useful resources):

1. What were the main objectives you had when you enrolled in this course?
2. How has the unit fulfilled these objectives?
3. What have been the most worthwhile aspects of this unit?
4. What aspects of this course were not useful?
5. How could this unit be improved?
6. If applicable, please comment on: a) the learning materials, b) online resources, c) academic support, d) administrative support, e) interaction with other students studying the unit, f) on-campus sessions.

Survey Results and Discussion

Among the 10 external students studying the two units, 7 (2 from the intermediate unit and 5 from the upper beginner unit) provided their responses for the survey. Although the number of responses was very small, students' comments and feedback provided some insight concerning their perceptions of the use of ICT for distance learning.

Constant Guidance and Timely Feedback with ICT

From the comments derived from the survey, it was observed that constant and well-structured guidance and timely feedback were highly appreciated by students. It was found, especially in the upper-beginner level, that the weekly guidance was detailed and progressed step by step with the teacher's friendly and encouraging comments.

Weekly lecture and tutorial class activities conducted in the face-to-face teaching arrangement became accessible before the end of the day. Distance learning students were required to access these to do weekly homework following weekly guidance. This process seemed to have a considerable effect on helping students to pace their study efforts and was therefore highly valued by students.

Distance learning with ICT adds dimensions to studying. This fact increases a student's anxiety. To reduce this anxiety, good instruction and timely feedback to keep students on track are very helpful, as is suggested in studies pertaining to the link between language anxiety and learner self-management (Hauck and Hurd 2005).

Teachers' Role and Learner Autonomy

It is well known that one of the difficulties of distance learning is that students often lack the self-discipline to study because of work or family commitments, and as a result they may easily fall behind. To be a successful external learner, therefore, one of many studies shows that students undertaking distance studies need to use more meta-cognitive strategies such as self-management, advance organisation and revision (White 1997). According to the findings of this study, through this they can develop an understanding of their learning process, prepare their study schedule well in advance and review their study more regularly compared to internal students. However, the comments given by students of our study imply that they may not have a chance to develop their meta-cognitive strategies due to the increased use of ICT and the constant guidance provided by teachers. It also implies that external students may have more frequent opportunities to interact with teachers than internal students due to the more personal interaction provided using ICT. In the case of internal students, there is much less opportunity for them to interact with teachers due to the large class numbers. This could have an adverse effect on learner autonomy in terms of developing meta-cognitive strategies. This same concern is also expressed in a study relating to the impact of course design on learner autonomy (Murphy 2005).

Sense of Learning Community & Creation of Social Space through the use of ICT

Achieving tasks through working with a partner or a group using the Wimba Voice Board and Skype was well accepted by students. Some commented that it was an enjoyable, inter-

esting and fulfilling experience working with other students. These opportunities allowed students to collaborate and progress their learning through their interaction with fellow students, and helped by reducing their sense of isolation.

Recorded lectures and tutorials using the WBLT were highly valued. It seems that this method provides external students with an inclusive feeling and a sense of community learning. There were comments such as, "It's good to hear how my fellow students are progressing in class." According to some student responses, however, compared to recorded lectures, recorded tutorials were not considered as useful, "As I couldn't practice with them, I found this was a bit unnecessary."

Student Satisfaction with ICT and Learning Motivation

Positive comments were observed regarding the use of ICT. The recorded lectures and tutorials using the WBLT were favoured by students. They commented that it was very helpful and revealed that they could study at their own pace because they could pause the recordings and take time to understand and practice. In contrast, some comments provided by internal students suggested that lectures were sometimes too fast for them to follow and they needed time to think.

There were positive comments made on tasks and activities conducted in class, but available through the unit website. It was well received that online delivery of tasks and activities allows students a chance to practice all aspects of language skills, as well as to understand the culture through the use of an authentic Japanese website.

The above comments indicate that the remarks made by Anderson were appropriate. He suggested that three types of interactions, a student's interactions with their class content, their teachers and with other students, are important for the development of a positive experience and satisfaction (Anderson 2005).

Teachers' Workload

It was observed that teachers spent a considerable amount of time on external students, despite their small numbers compared to that of internal students. This gave teachers a sense of teaching two different units instead of one. Although the implementation of ICT has blurred the differences between distance learning and face-to-face learning for students, teachers of distance learning students still require different needs and support.

Conclusion

This small-scale case study tries to provide some insight into students' perspectives of distance learning of a foreign language using ICT, especially CMC and WBLT, at a tertiary institution. Although the size of the study is small, open-ended student comments in the survey presented for unit evaluation provided us with an interesting portrayal of distance learning. External students undertaking distance learning enjoy the benefits of using CMC and WBLT, especially for foreign language learning. The use of these ICT provides them with more opportunities for interaction using the language, makes them feel like they are part of the learning community and keeps them motivated. Students highly value the well-structured guidance, scaffolding and timely support provided by teachers.

Further studies are needed pertaining to the distance learning of foreign languages using ICT, as this case study did not show in depth how students employed recorded lectures and tutorials using WBLT and CMC, and the influence of these methods on their study strategies. This was because of the small-scale of the study, and the use of an open-ended survey without detailed interviews.

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