"Passport to Japan": An Instructional Practice of Japanese Language for Specific Purpose via Blended Learning

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Abstract

Much has been written about the practices of blended learning: a combination of technology- mediated and face-to-face instructions. Based on the reported findings that blended learning is a more effective method to promote effective e-learning, the researchers decided to utilize this method in planning and implementing a pilot course called "Passport to Japan" under an enrichment programme. This course aims at preparing the students with basic oral Japanese language for specific purpose, either in the forms of joining a homestay programme or participating in a field trip to Japan at the end of the course. This paper reports on a mid-term review findings on the practice which examined the perspectives of the 12 students who responded out of the 28 students voluntarily enrolled in the course. It focuses on the students' perception about their learning experiences via the mode of blended learning including the challenges or hindrance which they faced. Data are collected through online questionnaire and face-to-face interview. Based on the findings, specific proposals for establishing an effective instructional course of foreign languages, namely Japanese language for specific purposes via the mode of blended learning are presented.

Introduction

Teaching foreign languages to students outside the target language countries is a difficult but challenging task.

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There is hardly any real context where students would need foreign languages in real life context outside the classroom. Gálová (2007) claims that the study of languages for specific purposes (LSP) is highly student-centred, focused on learners' professional linguistic needs, as well as teaching materials production. She further argues that in general, "it puts great emphasis on the practical output of language learning" (Gálová, 2007, p.2). This paper reports on the effort and initiative taken by the researcher to introduce an enrichment programme which involved learning of Japanese language for specific purpose (either in the form of joining a homestay programme or participating in a field trip to Japan at the end of the course) for the pre-service teachers undergoing a degree programme for English Language.

This paper reports on an initiative to provide support for learning and teaching (educational technology) rather than a focus of study in technology education itself. Rieber and Welliver (1989) argue that, "In order for the full potential of educational technology to be realized, it must be viewed more as a process rather than just the implementation of educational tools" (p. 22, as cited in Newhouse, 2002). Thus the educational technology process begins with the identification of an educational problem, not with the existence of a technology (Ang, Mohamed Amin & Melor, 2012). In this study, e-learning, (specifically, blended learning) was adopted as the mode of instruction to provide solutions and support for the learning process of a Japanese language basic oral communication course for beginners under an enrichment programme. E-learning mode was chosen to optimize the limited available "free time" and "space" among the students undergoing a Four-Year Bachelors Degree Programme of English Language. It is also aimed at providing the students with "real learning" opportunities and further enhancing self-paced learning where students can engage or commit themselves in their learning at their own speed and leisure.

Specifically, this paper reports on the findings of a mid-term review aimed to evaluate the practice based on the examination of the 12 students' perspectives of their learning through the blended learning mode. In other words, it examines the perception of the students of the influences on their learning via the blended learning mode. In addition, the paper attempts to identify the challenges and hindrances the students faced in their learning for further improvement of the course.

Literature Review

What is Blended Learning?

According to Colis and Moonen (2001, as cited in Rovai & Jordan, 2004), blended learning is a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online learning so that instruction occurs both in the classroom and online, and where the online component formed an extension of traditional classroom learning. Rovai and Jordan (2004), assert that blended learning is "potentially a more robust educational experience than either traditional or fully online learning can offer" (p.2). They supported their views with the report by Dziuban and Moskal (2001) about the success of blended learning courses at the University of Central Florida which replaced face-to-face class time with online learning. In this three-hour course, only one hour was used as actual face-to-face classroom time. This successful story is also supported with another research from other institutions such as Stanford University and the University of Tennessee which are noted to have provided valuable insights into some of the mechanisms by which blended learning is better than both traditional methods and individual forms of e-learning technology (Singh & Reed, 2001). In a nutshell, as aptly pointed out by Singh and Reed (2001), the findings have given the instructors confidence that blended learning not only offers students the ability to be more efficient but also to be more effective in delivering learning.

Why Blended Learning?

As noted by Singh and Reed (2001), one of the main considerations taken into account by the main researcher in adopting the mode of blended learning in the context of the study was because the concept of blended learning is rooted in the idea that "learning is not just a one-time event but that learning is a *continuous process*" (p. 6). It is undeniable that blending provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery type alone. Singh and Reed (2001), report four such benefits as summarized below:

(1) Improved learning effectiveness
     A blended learning strategy actually improves learning outcomes by providing a better match between how a learner wants to learn and the learning programme that is offered.

(2) Extending the reach

A single delivery mode inevitably limits the reach of a learning programme or critical knowledge transfer in some form or fashion. For instance, a physical classroom-training programme limits access to only those who can participate at a fixed time and location whereas a synchronous virtual classroom event or asynchronous online learning is inclusive of a remote audience.

(3) Optimizing development cost and time

By combining different delivery modes, it provides the potential to balance out and optimize the learning programme development and deployment cost and time.

(4) Optimizing intended results

Exceptional results are reported by organizations who undertook their initial blended learning initiatives. Learning objectives can be obtained in 50% less class time than traditional strategies. Travel costs and time have been reduced by up to 85%.

Context of the Study

The context of the study consists of an enrichment programme named "Passport to Japan" course for a four year pre-service teaching undergraduate degree in English Language at an Institute of Teacher Education. Students who voluntarily enrolled in the course are mostly the Year 1 and Year 3 students. In this study, students are given the choice to register for a homestay programme or a field trip study or both which are scheduled upon their completion of the course.

The course consists of 4 units called Transit Station 1 till 4 (see Table 1). Under each unit, specific learning tasks are set to provide the students with concrete learning evidences. The specific tasks are in the forms of either experiential learning sessions or learning products. Besides the learning outcomes, each unit has specific hidden curriculum in terms of integration of values and cross-cultural understanding and awareness in line with its rationale as enrichment programme for the pre-service teachers.

Table 1: Summary of Course Content

COURSE CONTENT
Registration & Briefing Session   (1) *Briefings on the enrichment programme's rationale, aims and objectives*   (2) *Introducing the content of the course & its instructional mode (Blended Learning)*
Preparation & Starting off   (1) *Invitation for the Course Online Enrolment via email.*   (2) *Orientation session (Face-to-face session)*   *Introduction & Explanation about:*   i. *The online learning platform & face-to-face schedule*   ii. *Home Stay Programme & Field Trip upon completion of the course.*   **Integration of Value:** Practice of the culture of "Saving"
Unit 1 /Transit Station 1: *Daily & Common Expressions/ Introducing Oneself & Others*   **Integration of Culture/Value:**   *Courtesy & Humbleness of the Japanese society*   **Learning Task:**   *Experiential Learning: Social Interaction with Waseda University students*
Unit 2/ Transit Station 2: *Asking & Describing Things, People & Places*   **Integration of Culture/Value:**   *Courtesy and Mutual respect*   **Learning Task:**   *Learning Product of Video Clip (Introducing oneself, interests/like/hobbies and one's hometown)*
Unit 3/ Transit Station 3: *Going Places/ Travelling in Japan*   **Integration of Culture/Value:**   *Mutual respect & Love for Nature & Cleanliness*   **Learning Task:**   *Learning Products: Video clip of Role Playing (Visiting Japan)*
Unit 4/ Transit Station 4: *Living in Japan: Experiencing Japanese Lifestyles*   **Integration of Culture/Value:**   *Mutual respect & Self-identity & Love for Nation*   **Learning Task:**   *Experiential learning: Home Visits & Interviewing Japanese hosts.*
Course   Evaluation   &   Feedback   *Note: Home-Stay Programme Orientation & Field Trip Briefing will be given to successful students who have completed the course and learning tasks.*

Methodology

This descriptive study employed qualitative data collection methods.

Instruments

The instruments comprised an online survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The online survey questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). The questionnaire items were created based on the e-Learning Experience Questionnaire utilized by Ginns and Ellis (2007) in their research on quality in blended learning. However, to cater for the purpose of this study, the ten statements were derived from seven constructs pertaining to various specific aspects of learning experiences, namely, (1) Instructional support & guidelines, (2) Selection & Arrangement of Learning Materials, (3) Purpose of Cultural Learning Materials, (4) Self-evaluation tools, (5) Time factor (Allowance for Self-paced learning), (6) Support of Face-to-face session and (7) Quality of Learning.

In addition, through four open-ended questions in the interview, the researchers were able to investigate and triangulate the respondents' views regarding their learning experiences as well as to identify the problems or challenges they had faced in their learning process.

Procedure

The online survey questionnaire was administered to all 28 registered students for a mid-term review of the course. However, only 12 students responded. As mentioned above, altogether ten statement-based items were constructed according to various aspects of their learning experiences. Face-to-face interviews were later administered to 6 randomly selected respondents from the 12 respondents of the online survey.

Data Analysis

Findings of the online questionnaire were analyzed and reported in terms of average means. The qualitative data from the open-ended items in the interview were examined and analyzed based on the Grounded Theory of categorization.

Findings and Discussion

Perceptions on Various Aspects of the Learning Experience

Overall, all respondents agreed with the ten statements pertaining to the positive aspects of their learning experiences (see Table 2).

Table 2: Perception on Statements pertaining to Various Aspects of Learning Experience

Aspect of Learning Experience	Item	Average Mean
Instructional support & guidelines	I understand clearly the purpose and contents of the course.	4.50
	The instruction and guidelines for using online learning support materials were clear to me.	4.50
Selection & Arrangement of Learning Materials	The online learning materials in the course so far are beneficial to my learning of Japanese language.	4.67
	The online learning materials were well-selected/adapted to guide my learning.	4.50
	The online learning materials were well arranged to try to make learning interesting to me.	4.33
Purpose of Cultural Learning Material	The cultural related materials helped me to understand Japanese culture better.	4.33
Self-evaluation tools	The self-evaluation quizzes helped me to learn effectively.	4.33
Time factor (Allowance for Self-paced learning)	I generally had enough time to understand the things I had to learn online.	3.83
Face-to-face support	The face-to-face sessions helped me to understand better in the course.	4.83
Quality of Learning	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my learning experience in the course.	4.17

n=12

The overall rate of agreement with the statements was above the average mean of 4 out of 5 except for one which is related to time factor which indicated the lowest average mean of 3.83.

Challenges and Hindrance faced in Learning

The qualitative data from the open-ended items in the interview provided information about challenges and hindrances faced by the respondents in their learning to date. Overall, the findings on their perception towards their learning experiences to date indicated positive responses. All six respondents interviewed, rated their learning as significant via the blended learning mode. Specifically, five expressed that their learning experience to date were very significant whereas one respondent rated his as significant.

Two exemplary excerpts which indicated positive attitudes towards their learning in terms of determination are shown below:

This[difficulty] will not make me stop learning this language . [R3]
Thanks to the great timing, I now urge myself to maximize this 3-week holidays for
self-study. [R7]

Another insightful excerpt in terms of positive attitude shown by a respondent in facing the challenge of peer pressure in competitiveness was:

… peer pressure is one of the fear factors that I am trying to turn into
motivation. [R5]

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that not all respondents showed such positive attitudes. One respondent (R6) in particular, indicated "lack of determination" in her comment about the hindrance she is facing in her learning The excerpt below taken from her response exemplified how the realization of various demands in learning a foreign language or their tight schedule hindered their readiness or willingness to proceed in their learning:

But when I was really learning the language, I found that learning a foreign
language needs much more effort, time, patience, motivation and interest.
Therefore, I think I am not ready to learn the language yet. [R6]

Other Comments and Suggestions for Further Improvement

With regards to suggestions for further improvement, 2 respondents interviewed specifically requested that the number of face-to-face interactions be increased.

The excerpts of both respondents are shown below:

> *I think the class should be conducted like 3 times a week so that we can make use of the language. Plus, we will also not forget the words that we gained in that week as we continue to learn it. [R3]*
> *I hereby request for more face-to-face interactions in coming semester to enhance memory and speech act. [R5]*

However, it is also interesting to note one respondent's (R5) awareness towards the importance of commitments from his peers in the course. This is clearly indicated in the excerpt of his interview as shown below:

> *Nonetheless, this requires cooperation and promise from students that they will keep up with the lessons provided. [R5]*

The overall findings from the qualitative data obtained from open-ended items in the interview are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Categorization based on Interview Data illustrated with examples

Interview Item Constructs	Categories	Example Items
Overall Perception on Learning Experiences	Level of Significance in Learning	I found the learning to be very significant. [R1] I think learning in the course is significant [R6]
	Level of Enjoyment & Fun in Learning	To date, I found learning to be very enjoyable. [R2] I really enjoyed learning Japanese in this course. [R5]
Challenges and Hindrance faced in Learning	Use/Utilization of the Language	I'm still trying my best to use Japanese language. [R3] The most prominent challenge for me is to apply the language in my daily life. [R4]
	Grammar related understanding	…also try my best to understand how to make good sentence arrangement [R3] I also have big trouble in digesting the wording system of the language [R4]
	Pronunciation	I have difficulty pronouncing the words in correct tone because I do not have a lot of exposure to Japanese culture and entertainment (songs, anime etc.). [R5]
	Realization towards Various Demands in Learning Foreign Language	…this requires cooperation and promise from students that they will keep up with the lessons provided. [R5] …. when I am really learning the language, I found that learning a foreign language needs much more effort, time, patience, motivation and interest. [R6]
	Lack of Previous Exposure to the language	I was not much exposed to Japanese language. I don't watch their TV shows as much as I watched English shows. [R2] Having zero exposure to Japanese before joining the course, I find myself facing adversities in catching up with others who have had interest in Japanese long ago.[R5]
Other comments	Encouraging comments	….the way that sensei asked us to speak one by one was the best thing about this course I think, this is because this gave us the opportunity to practice and sensei had given a lot of info to us.[R1] I think I am really satisfied with this course. [R2]
Suggestion for Further Improvement	Request to increase the number of Face-to-face session	I think the class should be conducted like 3 times a week so that we can make use of the language. Plus, we will also not forget the words that we learnt in that week as we still continue to learn it. [R3] I hereby request for more face-to-face interactions in the coming semester in order to enhance memory and speech acts. [R5]

Implications and Discussion

Two implications of the study are identified and discussed along with considerations and recommendations for future improvement in the practice.

Allowing Sufficient Time for Self-Paced Learning

Findings of the study revealed the lowest average mean of 3.83 with regards to time allowance for self-paced learning. This implies that sufficient duration of time for self-paced learning should be taken into consideration for scheduling each unit. On the other hand, the big question is "How much time is really sufficient?" The answer differs from individual students in terms of their learning speed or pace in mastering the learning content. It also depends on the amount or the range of learning content of each individual unit. Therefore, it is recommended that a solution to this issue regarding time for self-paced learning is to utilize an individualized learning plan for each student. In other words, each individual student will plan and determine their own learning schedule based on the learning content and the total duration of the course set. The individualized learning plan is to be drawn up by the students themselves during the course orientation before the commencement of the course. After all, as aptly pointed out by Singh and Reed (2001), self-paced learning implies solitary, on-demand learning at a pace that is managed or controlled by the learner.

Maintaining Level of Motivation and Readiness towards Continuing Learning

One interesting point to note in this study is the decrease in the level of motivation and readiness in continuing learning among students who faced challenges and hindrance in their learning process. Therefore, for future improvement, specific measures should be taken to ensure that the students' level of motivation and readiness in continuing their learning until completion of the course will be maintained. Such measures might be crucial, in the case of foreign language courses where immediate needs are not felt by the learners. Moreover, the course under this study is only an enrichment programme which does not affect their academic achievement in their degree programme. For instance, instructors could arrange for mentoring or consultation sessions with certain identified students either individually or in small groups at appropriate intervals throughout the course.

This point of view is supported by Driscoll (n.d.) in her assertion in updating the definitions of blended learning; i.e there is a need to use mentoring or coaching as a tool to cater for the learners' need for someone who could help them with the problems they encountered in their studies and also to enable instructors to improve the face-to-face classes.

Another possible recommendation will be to have more peer learning activities in order to provide peer support and encouragement in both and their own respective learning process. The importance of peer learning is noted by Amelia, Mohamed Amin and Rosseni (2009) in their study on collaborative learning community, "The role of peers is also important in ensuring everybody participates in the learning process" (p.125).

Study Limitations

This study is limited by the small number of only 12 respondents instead of the total population of 28 students. Another possible limitation was that the scope of blended learning was limited to the perception of the students on their own learning experiences (quality of learning in a blended context) and not thoroughly explored in terms of instruction (quality in teaching in a blended context).

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the findings, it is evident that blended learning based practice in a foreign language course for specific purposes has indeed shown promising potentials in improving quality in learning. More importantly, by allowing students to be responsible for their own learning seemed to have positive influences or effects on them, namely their determination to succeed is further enhanced. Generally, it could be concluded that through specified learning tasks in each unit, the participants were actively engaged in carrying out their own practices in accomplishing the tasks. In other words, it promotes self-directedness among the students.

Nevertheless, individual differences in terms of learning pace or speed and level of perseverance in facing challenges and hindrance in learning should also be given due consideration.

On this note, future work concerns efforts in ensuring "successful learners" among the "less-committed" or "skeptical" students using peer learning techniques in order to develop peer encouragement and motivation among the students. In a nutshell, it is important for instructors to bear in mind the refined definition of blended learning proposed by Singh and Reed (2001):

> *Blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the "right" learning technologies to match the "right" personal learning style to transfer the "right" skills to the "right" person at the "right" time.* (p.2)

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