

Spotlight on Distance Learning and Undergraduate International ELLs

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Abstract

Many institutional programs are changing to incorporate more online opportunities as a way to increase enrollment and meet the needs of their students. Subsequently, international English language learners are being encouraged to take online courses in order to complete their programs of study at United States colleges or universities (Tan, Lee, & Steven, 2010). Although technology is widely accessible due to its affordability, it is imperative to consider whether it is being used effectively in the institutions of higher education. These institutions need to consider the learning needs of all students, including international English language learners, who choose to take online courses.

Keywords: Distance Learning or online learning, English language learner, language development

Introduction

According to Allen and Seaman (2008), with all the advances in technology, distance learning is rapidly substituting the traditional face-to-face classroom environment. Tan, Lee, and Steven (2010), maintained that the development of technology has provided new learning opportunities, which are increasingly more accessible to a growing number of individuals in higher education. Tan et al. (2010) emphasized that international English language learners (ELLs) are often encouraged or required to take online courses with the language of instruction in English in order to complete their programs of study at United States colleges or university. However, Min-Hua (2007) emphasized that international students have several challenges in their academic studies at North American universities. These challenges include different factors: (a) inadequate English proficiency, (b) unfamiliarity with North American culture, (c) lack of appropriate study skills or strategies, (d) academic learning anxiety, (e) low social self-efficacy, (f) financial difficulties, and (g) separation from family and friends. Furthermore, Min-Hua (2007) argued that despite the general perception that American culture is characterized more by diversity than by homogeneity, the American ideology of cultural homogeneity implies an American mindset that because Eurocentric cultures are superior to others, people from different cultures should conform to the dominant monoculture canon and norms. Also, Min-Hua (2007) emphasized that these students usually are: (a) well educated in their native languages, (b) have met a passing score on the required (TOEFL) exam, and (c) need further language study in order to be well prepared for college-level work.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Learning

According to Appana (2008), distance learning is more convenient and advantageous due to home access and scheduling freedom. However, distance learning can pose certain learning disadvantages. According to Ahern (2008), the ability to remove the constraints of time and place is a major hallmark of computer mediated communication, but still he supported real time synchronous forms of interaction. He stated that the use of "synchronous technologies create a strong network bond because each of the participants must be present at the same time in order to communicate" (p. 99).

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However, Cuning, Fagerten, and Holmsten (2010) reported that many of the net-based English for academic purpose students experienced technological difficulties and the constraints of the online space available would sometimes cause problems in asynchronous seminar. Although the rich environment provided by the desktop videoconferencing system provided multiple modes of communication, the authors concluded that "a modern communication approach requires both synchronous channels and voice" (p. 174). Appana (2008) posed that distance learning is attractive to students because of its convenience. Online courses are advantageous because they can be accessed from home and provide scheduling freedom. Appana (2008) emphasized that some people feel online courses lacks learning advantages and hinders the learning process of its users. Further, Appana (2008) reported that "depending on a student's learning style; distance learning can pose certain limitations" (p. 8). In support of this notion, in an empirical study with an emphasis on the significance of affective factors conducted by Lin (2008), this researcher stated that "more than 80% of students believed that their relaxed and positive attitudes and teacher's interesting ways of teaching and frequent encouragement did enable them to achieve a greater knowledge of English much more effectively" (p. 120). According to Maurino (2006), distance learning lacks the benefit of natural inquiry. Maurino (2006) emphasized that in a traditional classroom, when students have questions they can raise their hands and ask, whereas in an online course this would not be possible. In an online course, students would have to email the professor the question and wait for a response. Maurino (2006) stressed that "the questions may become forgotten or remain unanswered, possibly negatively affecting a student's overall grade" (p. 258). In a distance online learning environment, communication is delivered to the learner through electronic channels, such as e-mails and discussion boards. Thus, according to Taylor and White (1985), the attention of the teacher moves from instructional delivery, which is of prime concern in the classroom, to instructional design. This has consequences for the nature of the input that the learner receives.

Second Language Learning

According to Al-Shehri and Gitsaki (2010), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers have utilized the Cognitive Load Theory to account for differences in learner performance with regard to different learning activity. Some instructional designs were shown to have an impact on cognitive load and working memory. Al-Shehri and Gitsaki (2010) emphasized that this impact was found to be accentuated in a multimedia environment where there is a variety of interacting elements and tools, which can lead to cognitive overload and consequently reduced learning outcomes. Krashen and Terrell (1983) stressed in their study that through asking and answering questions in traditional classroom settings, students become motivated to engage in a discussion and participate in study groups. They emphasized that students in online classrooms do not have the benefit of interaction with each other, which can limit their overall learning experiences. Furthermore, Rosenfeld (2007) noted that there are fewer distractions in a traditional classroom setting; students are encouraged to be active participants. Furthermore, Zhang and Kenny (2001) maintained that in an online classroom, students are more prone to be easily distracted because they are at home. They may be distracted by personal phone calls, chores, TV or even roommates (Kenny & Zhang, 2010). Wenden (1991) suggested that in an online course there is no assurance that a student is paying full attention to the lesson at hand. Additionally, Tucker (2000) maintained that traditional classroom learning provides additional resources unavailable to the distance learner. In a traditional setting, the students have access to libraries, laboratories, and other resources. Tucker (2000) underscored that students have more in person access to their professors in a traditional classroom than online. On the other hand, Pica (1983), argued that the fact that the teacher and learner are separated does not necessarily mean that the learner cannot act on the input. Pica (1983), suggested that, despite limited input, much of second language acquisition (SLA) depends upon learner variables and not on environment or contextual variables. While the question of optimal linguistic environment for adult ELLs has been considered for many years, Pica (1983) suggested that adults can increase their second language proficiency in either a formal (i.e., classroom) or informal environment (i.e., online). On the other hand, Van Patten (2007) stressed that the optimal linguistic environment is that which provides face-to-face instruction.

Distance Learning and International ELLs

Although technology is widely accessible due to its affordability, it is imperative to consider whether it is being used effectively in the institutions of higher education. These institutions need to consider the learning needs of all students, including English language learners, who choose to take online courses. In a study of three international students' experiences in distance learning at a four year institution, Kenny and Zhang (2010) found that some of the participants were reluctant to engage in course discussions because they were not sure what they could contribute. These students were not from North America and lacked background knowledge.

The design and delivery of the online course were focused on what was familiar for local students, and students with strong English proficiencies and Western cultural backgrounds tended to dominate the discussion forum. Kenny and Zhang (2010) concluded that, in order to meet the needs of learners, "it is necessary for online distance education course designers to be aware of the needs and expectations of international students" (p. 29). Maurino (2006) maintained that students in distance learning can lack the benefit of unplanned inquiry. In a distance learning environment, students have to send their questions via email and wait for a response from the instructor. Maurino (2006) emphasized that in an online environment students sometimes have questions that go unanswered due to the limited accessibility of the instructor; this may have negative impact in the students' overall grades and learning experiences. Beeley's (2000) study on student success in distance learning found that students with low task values, low prior grades in English, and students over the age of 28 were more likely to drop out of online classes. There was also evidence that "dropping the class was negatively correlated with the grade achieved in English" (p. 6). This result might be expected, in which a student who has strong English skills would find the text based demands of the distance learning class easier. Even though distance learning has become popular in the U.S. as an alternative way to obtain an education, the quality of the education of the students who take online courses at the higher education level is of alarm to some. Benson (2003) emphasized that it is important to assess participants' learning in the online format to ensure learning. Meyer (2007) maintained that in traditional classroom settings, students assist one another through discussion opportunities, which facilitates comprehension. In an online environment, students may not have the advantage of interacting with each other, which can limit their complete learning experience. In an online classroom, students usually have the benefit of working from the convenience of their homes; however, without being in a physical classroom and engaging with other students, online learners may find they are distracted by cell phones, television, radio, children, spouses, or roommates. There is no way to ensure a student is fully engaged in the learning experience in an online course. These distractions cause the student to fall behind on their course work, thus, leading to increased anxiety. Pichette (2009) compared the anxiety profile of classrooms and distance language learners, as well as anxiety levels between first semester and more experienced students in both environments. The results of the study indicated that there were no differences in anxiety profiles between classroom and distance learners in the case of French speaking language learners at Quebec University. However, it showed close to significantly higher anxiety among first semester students than among more experienced learners in the case of distance learning.

Conclusion

As the provision of online course offerings proliferates quickly throughout U.S. universities, researchers continue to explore the digital medium. Significant differences in student achievement between traditional (i.e., face-to-face) and online courses have not been consistently identified. The overall effectiveness of distance learning continues to pose questions from both the academic world and the general public. Practical implications revolve around ways to design online courses where international undergraduate English language learners' interests and needs are acknowledged.

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