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Distance Learning and Learner Readiness: Combining Pedagogies for Enculturating Language Learners to Online Education

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Abstract

More than a decade after the first introduction of online e-learning platforms, distance education has turned into a defining component of the educational contexts across different grade levels and disciplines including second and foreign language (SL/FL) teaching/learning. In line with this growing popularity, consciousness about the essence of providing the required technological infrastructure and relevant professional development programmes or courses has also increased. These development programmes and technological infrastructure have enhanced the efficacy of online education. When it comes to language learners in online SL/FL learning settings, however, research has been mainly concerned with (a) the impact of different online learning approaches on learner achievement, (b) their perceptions of online education, and (c) the technological knowledge and skills required for effective learner performance in online learning platforms. Another factor that appears highly influential in the success and/or failure of online learning attempts is learners’ readiness for this mode of learning. Despite its significance, this topic is a research strand that is less widely dealt with, particularly in higher education settings and the context of second and foreign language education.

Grounded on the social constructivist theories of learning, online and distance education presumes more active roles for learners by placing them at the centre of the process of learning. Learners are expected to take more responsibility in the process of their learning in online real-time or asynchronous platforms. Getting enculturated to this type of learning can be a cumbersome task for the learners who are accustomed to the transmissive pedagogies in which knowledge is mainly transmitted to the learners by the teacher through direct classroom lectures. Transmissive, teacher-centred pedagogies dominate the educational systems in different countries in Asia (for example, the Iranian educational system). Getting accustomed to being the recipients of information all through their K-12 education years, this group of learners suddenly find themselves in highly learner-centred learning platforms when starting their studies in higher education settings – many of which offer some or all of their courses in the distance mode. This can seriously affect their learning outcomes and their attitudes towards the efficacy of online education.
Considering the determining role of learner readiness in the effectiveness of online learning attempts, exploring relevant strategies that can prepare learners (i.e., enculturate them) for online education appears to be imperative for technology-enhanced learning research, in general, and computer-assisted language learning research, in particular. To contribute to this research base, in the present article, I report on a study which was conducted on two groups of engineering major students at a public university of technology who attended online real-time technical English courses. One group was randomly assigned as the control group and the other as the experimental group. The students in both groups were accustomed to teacher-centred transmissive pedagogies. Each group comprised 30 students. To enhance learner readiness for a learner-centred language learning experience in an online synchronous classroom, the experimental group received a combined pedagogy treatment. In this approach, the teacher makes a combined use of teacher- and learner-centred teaching approaches during every session to help learners get effectively enculturated to online learning demands. While students experience less control in a more structured online learning platform during the first few sessions of the course, a dose of flexibility is gradually injected into the design moving towards the end of the semester. This way, students experience more control as they are moved in a step-by-step manner, to the centre of the process of learning through the careful use of well-thought teacher questions, classroom discussions and in-class activities. The control group learners received the conventional teacher-centred treatment to which they were accustomed.

Following a quasi-experimental pretest and post-test research design, I explored the impact of combined pedagogies on learner preparedness for online language education. The pre- and post-tests comprised 40 multiple-choice items which were checked for face and content validity by a panel of subject-matter experts. Success in the end-of-the-course exit exam was taken as an indication of learner preparedness for online language learning. The data obtained from pre- and post-treatment language achievement tests were analysed conducting paired and independent sample t-tests. Assumption testing was also performed to ensure the applicability of the analysis approaches for the present database. I used the SPSS software, version 21, for conducting the analyses and observed that the experimental group learners outperformed their peers in the control group in the post-treatment test in a statistically significant way.

Although the students in the control group experienced language learning in an online real-time setting in which a teacher-centred pedagogical approach was applied (to which they were accustomed to), their final exam mean score was generally lower compared to that of the students in the experimental group who were enculturated to online learning through combined pedagogies. The observed difference can be attributed to the efficacy of the selected treatment for preparing the learners to gradually take responsibility for their own learning in online learning platforms by giving them adequate practice and enculturation time. The obtained results can be specifically productive for curriculum designers and materials developers by highlighting the
essence for redefining our instructional design plans for online learning platforms and
developing related materials that effectively prepare learners for this mode of learning
rather than merely focusing on developing their subject matter or technological
knowledge.

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