An investigation into offering flexible language courses utilising blended learning

An Investigation into Offering Flexible Language Courses Utilising Blended Learning

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Abstract

Flexible learning options are playing an increasingly integral part of university courses around the world. If KUIS is to offer flexible learning options to students in the future, we need to be sure that the materials and delivery modes have been carefully researched. The researchers draw on previous research into blended learning which incorporates a combination of face-to-face and online study opportunities. The researchers report on a pilot project which offered flexible learning options and discuss the outcomes of the course from the perspectives of the learners and the instructor. Implications for future courses at KUIS are discussed.

1. Background

Trends in education worldwide

Perhaps the best way to frame this paper is in terms of response to change; Nicholson, Murphy and Southgate (2011) discuss ways in which changes in society, changing economic climates, technological development, industrial restructuring, increased global competition and changing employment patterns have an impact on the field of education. An additional change affecting Japan in particular is the decrease in birth rate and the competition for institutions to attract students (Kubota, Terashima, Nakahashi & Morioka, 2008). In order to respond to change, higher education institutions around the world are drawing on available

to technology in order to broaden the way in which they offer their courses. The vast majority of higher education institutions offer multiple ways for students to earn credit either by working exclusively online, exclusively offline or through a combination of both. One example of a highly reputable institution offering exclusively distance education is the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom. The OU began offering courses in the late 1960s and initially relied on television broadcasts and postal delivery of materials. They now use web-based approaches to delivering content, creating learning communities and giving feedback to learners. They are considered to be at the forefront of distance education and research.

In addition to institutions offering flexibility of study options for registered students, another recent trend is the growing availability of MOOCs (Massively Open Online Courses). MOOCs are increasingly being offered by reputable universities, and anyone with an internet connection is able to take a course, free of charge, through providers. The following statistics were reported by Cadwalladr in the Observer newspaper in November, 2012: Online course provider *The Khan Academy* claims to have ten million students worldwide, and another such provider *Udacity* has 200,000 students. Free content is also offered by the world's leading universities via *iTunesU* and *OpenLearn. Coursera*, another online course provider has partnered with 33 leading universities including Stanford and Princeton to enable anyone to access its courses and currently has 1.8 million students enrolled. These courses provide online lectures, coursework, exams and opportunities to interact with classmates and the instructor.

Trends in Japan

Outside Japan, distance learning is considered to be a successful approach. Within Japan many, distance programmes exist; however, uptake is slow compared with other countries, and dropout rates are high. Four reasons for this have been reported by Kuboto et al. (2008) at Waseda University in Tokyo.

(1) Distance education is not appreciated in workplaces

Japanese companies tend to provide the training staff need in house and an additional qualification is not deemed necessary and, usually, no time off or support is given. In addition, employees may conceal the fact that they are engaging in further study from colleagues (Uno, 2008).

(2) Acquiring qualifications does not directly improve working conditions

Outside Japan, professionals often choose to take distance learning courses in order to enhance their career prospects. An increased qualification can lead to earlier promotion and increased opportunities within a company. In Japan, the career structure is often defined according to age or length of time served within a company regardless of qualifications. In short, people working in Japanese companies do not expect to be promoted as a result of earning a qualification.

(3) Good public transport

Distance education often stemmed from a practical need; either the desire to serve

students who live in rural areas with little access to public transport; or to offer options across long distances such as in the case of Australia. Although Japan does have rural areas, the vast majority of people live within reach of good public transportation. In that case, students prefer to attend classes rather than to study from home.

(4) Japanese are group oriented and expect more social interaction

Most students in Japan are reported to be group oriented and studying alone would not be an attractive option as they expect more social interaction during a learning activity, so would be more inclined to attend traditional face-to-face classes.

Despite these reasons for not choosing distance courses, distance learning has actually been available in Japan since the Meiji era and, according to Miyazoe and Anderson (2012), 217,000 students are currently taking distance courses in Japan. The Open University in Japan has 77,000 students enrolled and a new law passed in 2012 authorising other licenced institutions to offer accredited distance courses may mean further increases, so it appears that times are changing.

From distance learning to flexible and blended learning

It was useful to draw on some of the research related to distance learning, but the courses that the present researchers are investigating are not actually distance learning, but flexible options within mainstream education. Flexible learning has been defined as learning that "expands choice on what, when, where and how people learn. It supports different styles of learning, including elearning"

(Australian National Training Authority, 2005).

In the field of language teaching, the concept of blended learning has been much discussed. Definitions of blended learning are often disputed, but the authors of this paper consider it to be 'a combination of forms of instructional technology, including traditional forms of learning used in conjunction with web-based, online approaches' (Nicolson et al., 2011, p. 5). Blended and flexible learning go beyond the practical benefits for learners; as Takeuchi (2007) says, the approach offers "enrichment" and not just "enlargement" as distance courses were originally intended to do. Enrichment means that technology is used to enhance the quality of education through interactivity and multimodality. This kind of learning is shaping new learning paradigms (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). More recently, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) note that "the time has come to reject the dualistic thinking that seems to demand choosing between conventional face-to-face and online learning, a dualism that is no longer tenable, theoretically or practically" (2008, p. 5).

2. The blended learning model

The theoretical model used for this piece of research is the blended learning model. The blended learning model combines combines "the advantages of online teaching and learning with face-to-face classroom instruction" (Liu, 2011, p. 83) and technology is beneficially integrated (Bax, 2003). Three ways (according to Liu & Chen, 2007) that technology is integrated into a language course are (1) through the provision of activities specifically designed for language learners (e.g. language games and tests), (2) through the use of tools that were designed for

communication purposes for general users providing language input and practice (e.g. email and forums), (3) through the presence of a learning management systems (e.g. Moodle). The use of authentic texts intended for a general audience could also be added to this list. In order to integrate these activities, attention is paid to both hard and soft technologies (Liu, 2011).

Graham (2006) suggests four levels of blended learning integration: (1) the institutional level, (2) the programme level, (3) the course level, and (4) the activity level. Liu (2011) notes that in order for a blended learning approach to be successful, all four levels need to be defined in an institution. This ensures that an institutional policy supports efforts made by instructors and programme developers and ultimately benefits students. There also needs to be first and foremost a focus on sound pedagogy (Nicolson et al., 2011).

According to Thorne (2003), successful blended learning should incorporate the following features:

- Identifying learning needs
- Setting up the level of demand
- Recognizing and respecting learning styles
- Identifying learning goals
- Friendly demonstration
- Follow-up support
- Self-monitoring process

Liu (2011) further defines a series of desirable outcomes that technology in a

blended learning model should support. These are (1) integrating a program using a common system, (2) facilitating written communication via asynchronous discussions, (3) developing oral skills through synchronous interactive tools, (4) promoting cultural understanding through guided CALL programs, (5) using collaborative learning to enhance linguistic and communicative competence, (6) developing critical thinking, (7) utilizing project-based learning to enhance language learning transfer.

Incorporating all of these consideration would take substantial planning which is possibly one reason why institutions may be reluctant to integrate technology systematically, and that most research published focuses on developments at the activity level rather than at a program or institutional level.

3. Need for research

At Kanda University, in line with official guidelines, credit-bearing courses have a minimum amount of classroom-based time. Because of this, fully flexible options at KUIS have been unavailable at the programme level, but have often been embedded at the activity level within individual lessons. For example, teachers integrate an online forum into the class activities so that students can contribute ideas outside class. An online forum is an interactive online space designed for discussion purposes. The aforementioned change in law implies that more flexible options may be possible in the future for approved courses; however, there is a need to conduct research into feasibility and appropriateness for KUIS students.

Research design

The research was designed to investigate the feasibility of offering flexible options at KUIS. In order to explore this, it was necessary for students and their instructor (one of the researchers) to experience flexible learning for themselves. The researchers obtained approval to design and offer flexible activities within the course, one of numerous credit-bearing content-based courses which are offered to third and fourth-year English majors in the English Department. Such courses are offered throughout the year and run for 15 weeks. With two lessons a week, 30 x 90-minute lessons are offered a semester. In addition to these courses, a small number are also offered during the summer holiday in an intensive format. This research was conducted in one of these summer courses which lasted for seven and a half days: four lessons on each of the first seven days and two lessons offered on the last day. The "experimental day" comprising four lessons was scheduled for the fourth day. Activities undertaken during the first three days were carefully planned so that students were suitably prepared.

Two research questions were generated:

1 What were some of the instructor's observations?
2 What were students' perceptions of the experimental day?

Data analysis

The researchers take an interpretative approach to the data analysis in this study. The evidence was then used to generate some general observations which would help the researchers address the overarching goal of this project: Is flexibility in learning feasible?

Participants

There were 24 participants who were all Japanese students majoring in English. All of them were in their 3rd or 4th year at KUIS and were taking the intensive summer course. All of the students in the class agreed to complete the questionnaires and allowed the data to be analysed for this research.

The following section outlines the course including the piloting and development stages. Following that, there will be a description of the instructor's perceptions of the lessons, and then a description of the students' perceptions.

4. Piloting and course development

The experimental course

In order to give the 24 students the opportunity of accessing the course materials whether on or off campus, the university's course-management system "Moodle" was used. A custom-made course called "Phil's Summer Sogo 2012" was created to which all students were given access (see Figure 1). It should be noted that although all students were familiar with the system, practice activities were scheduled before the experimental day.

In addition to using Moodle, students created their own Google email account at the beginning of the course. Using this account, students were trained in the use of Google Documents, an online data-storage service through which it is possible (a) to create documents and (b) to collaborate with others while editing the documents online in real time.

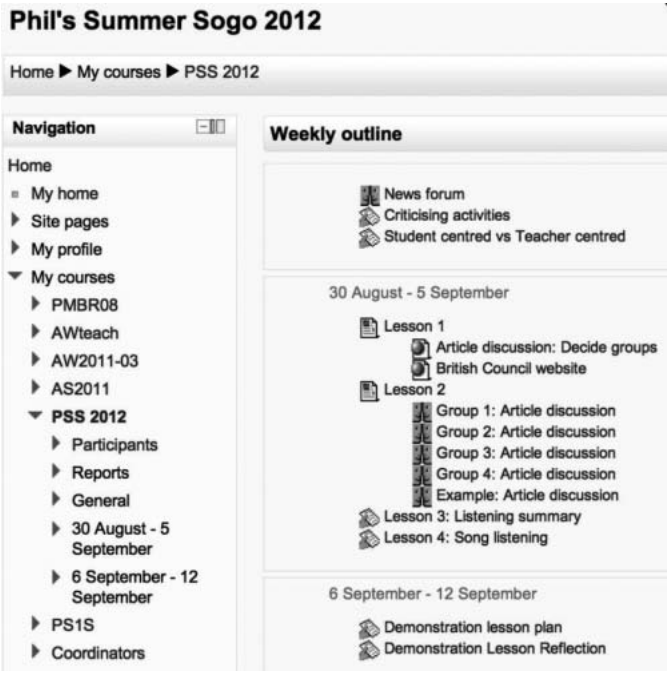


Figure 1 The custom-made course

The first three days of the course provided the opportunity for students to be trained in the use of Google Documents and to familiarize themselves with the type of activities planned for the experimental fourth day of the course. On the third day, students were given a detailed explanation of the procedure for the experimental day, and students were informed of the different ways that they could contact the instructor if there were any problems: by email, through Moodle, by telephone or by visiting the instructor at the university.

The experimental day

The fourth day comprised four lessons which were posted on Moodle. These lessons can clearly be seen in Figure 1 above. By clicking on the links, students were presented with clear instructions about what they had to do in all four lessons. The first lesson plan is included below (Figure 2).

The experimental lessons: Lesson One

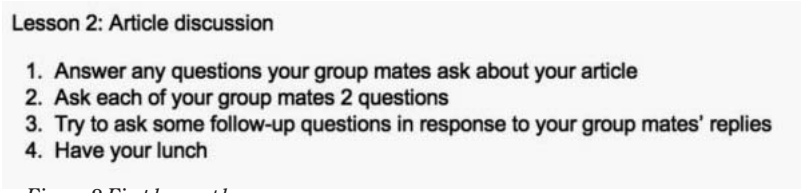


Figure 2 First lesson plan

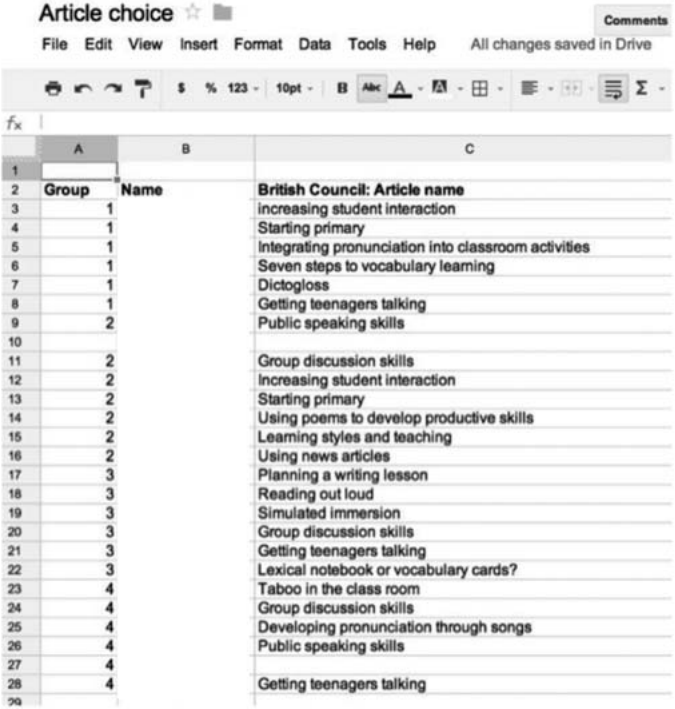
In the first lesson of the day, students were informed that they would have to prepare for an online discussion which was scheduled for the second lesson. Accordingly, students were asked to access the British Council's website in order to select a short paper of their choice related to teaching methodologies. They were then instructed that the remainder of the lesson was devoted to writing a short summary of the article which they then had to post on one of four forums specifically created for this activity on Moodle. To determine which forum they had to use, students accessed a Google Document which was shared among all members in the class. Students were free to choose which of four forums they would join (Figure 3) (note: students' names have been hidden to maintain privacy); however, they were asked not to join a forum if someone had already signed up with the same article. Students then posted their work to one of four

Moodle-based forums . In short, students needed to use three different systems to complete the task:

(a) The Internet: to locate a short article.

(b) Google Documents: to sign up for a discussion group

(c) Moodle: to post the summary.


Article choice

File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Help All changes saved in Drive

Comments

	A	B	C
1			
2	Group	Name	British Council: Article name
3	1		increasing student interaction
4	1		Starting primary
5	1		Integrating pronunciation into classroom activities
6	1		Seven steps to vocabulary learning
7	1		Dictogloss
8	1		Getting teenagers talking
9	2		Public speaking skills
10			
11	2		Group discussion skills
12	2		Increasing student interaction
13	2		Starting primary
14	2		Using poems to develop productive skills
15	2		Learning styles and teaching
16	2		Using news articles
17	3		Planning a writing lesson
18	3		Reading out loud
19	3		Simulated immersion
20	3		Group discussion skills
21	3		Getting teenagers talking
22	3		Lexical notebook or vocabulary cards?
23	4		Taboo in the class room
24	4		Group discussion skills
25	4		Developing pronunciation through songs
26	4		Public speaking skills
27	4		
28	4		Getting teenagers talking

Figure 3 Google Document used for sign ups

The experimental lessons: Lesson Two

Having (a) selected an article from the British Council website about teaching methodologies, (b) individually prepared a summary of the article, and then

posted their work to one of four Moodle-based forums specifically created for this activity, students moved onto the second lesson. Students were instructed to ask each of their five group mates two questions about their articles / summaries (Figure 4). Therefore, students were supposed to ask a total of ten questions, and answer ten questions throughout the scheduled lesson (Figure 5). Having finished, students broke for lunch.

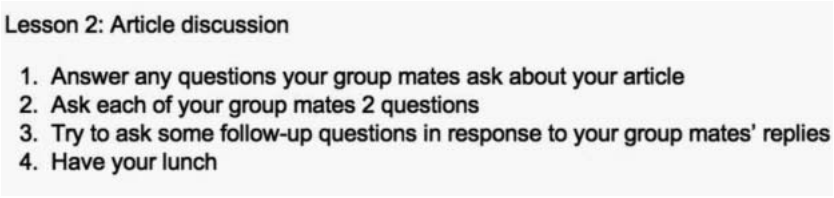


Figure 4 Instructions for students

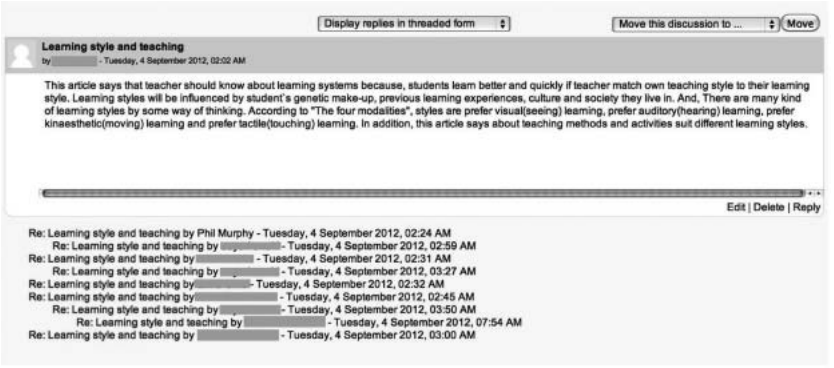


Figure 5 Students asking questions online

The experimental lessons: Lesson Three

In one of the lessons conducted before the experimental day, students studied about how to present a song-listening lesson and a demonstration was given. Related to this topic, two short papers from the British Council website provided

the basis for suitable background reading. The first paper provided a framework for conducting a listening lesson comprising three parts: (a) pre-listening activities, (b) while listening activities and (c) post-listening activities, and the second paper focused on the benefits of pre-listening activities in more detail. Before a demonstration of a song-listening lesson was given, the instructor used the two aforementioned papers to explain about the different components of a song listening lesson, and also to provide some theory and rationale for including such activities. The pre-listening activity consisted of discussion questions as a means to introduce the topic behind the song. There was also a vocabulary exercise which focused on words found in the lyrics. Stemming from a previous lesson focusing on materials design, vocabulary was presented in the form of a "Wordle", otherwise known as a word cloud (Figure 4). Students had to initially check their understanding of the words before continuing with the rest of the materials. For the while-listening section of the lesson, students listened to the song three times and filled in the blanks with their partners. Having then checked the answers as a class, students moved on to the post-listening activity. This section of the lesson comprised discussion questions which were designed to elicit the students' (a) reactions to and (b) comments about issues related to the meaning of the song.

In line with other lessons given on the course, students were instructed to write a short 250-to-300-word summary in order to record the main points of the lesson. With the purpose of experiencing different formats of study for reflection activities later in the course, students had already written summaries alone and in pairs. This time, therefore, students were provided with the opportunity to experience writing summaries in small groups during the third lesson of the experimental day.

To prepare for this lesson, students were asked to remain in the groups from the listening lesson itself. Students were then asked to collaboratively write their summary using the Google Document created during the listening lesson. Instructions were also provided so that the students could download their document in order to post it on Moodle. A plan for lesson three can be found below (Figure 7).

Figure 6 A word cloud

Lesson 3: Listening summary

1. Work with your group mates
2. Use your group's "Listening summary" Google Document
3. Write a summary about the main points of "Teaching Listening"
4. The summary should be about 250 words long
5. Download your finished Google Doc
6. Save your summary as follows: familyname1-familyname2-familyname3-familyname4.doc(x)
7. Upload your finished Google Doc to Moodle
8. Have a break

Figure 7 Lesson Plan 3

The experimental lessons: Lesson Four

As noted below in the plan for Lesson Four (Figure 8), students worked collaboratively to develop materials for a song-listening lesson. As described above, the materials had to demonstrate an awareness of pre-, while and post-elements to the lesson whether at the sentence level or above. Also, as noted above, groups used Google Documents which were created in the listening lesson before the experimental day. Students not only worked on the document together, but they also had to create and include a word cloud having decided upon the song and then the vocabulary / language that they wanted to focus on. Once the document comprising lesson materials for a song-listening lesson had been created, it was downloaded from Google Documents and then uploaded to Moodle.

Lesson 4: Song listening activity

1. Work with your group mates
2. Use your group's "Song listening activity" Google Document
3. Make a song-listening activity
4. Download your finished Google Doc
5. Save your Word file as follows: familyname1-familyname2-familyname3-familyname4.doc(x)
6. Upload your finished Google Doc to Moodle
7. Finished for the day

Figure 8 Song activity

5. Research Question One: Instructor perceptions of the experimental day

A first person narrative approach was adopted in order to glean instructor perceptions of the course. Based on the teacher's reflective narrative (below), the second researcher identified salient points and verified these points with the instructor (first researcher). The salient points were combined with the perceptions of the students in order to address the overall research question: are

flexible options feasible for this context?

Instructor's narrative

Upon announcing the experimental day, an immediate concern for students was related to attendance. Due to the fact that attendance for the course described here is compulsory, students were unsure about how their participation would be recorded. Having reassured students that attendance would be checked and determined through evidence of a presence online, the matter was resolved.

Students also raised concerns about being able to do group work at a distance at the specified time. However, in contrast to regular distance-learning courses where students can study at a time of their choice, both the time of study and what to study was specified due to the intensive nature of the course. Therefore, rather than the students organizing a time for study themselves, these details were supplied in the lesson plans; in short, it was essentially a requirement that students had to be online.

The experimental lessons: Lesson One

Selecting a paper related to teaching methodology and then leading a discussion on the topic was an activity that had previously worked well in the classroom on the regular course on numerous occasions. This lesson, therefore, was considered to be valuable for numerous reasons: most notably, students were able to select an article of personal interest. As the course often catered to students studying for different teaching licences, students had the opportunity to focus on articles specifically related to their needs as trainee teachers; for example, students were

able to select papers directed at the elementary school, junior high school, high school and/or university level.

Whereas in face-to-face mode students usually worked in groups of four, the synchronous discussion in online mode circumvented the pragmatic need to wait for appropriate moments to contribute to discussions. In contrast to face-to-face mode, therefore, the medium of the forum allowed all participants in the group to contribute to the discussions whenever they wished. For this reason, and also due to the time allocated for this lesson, groups comprising of six members was deemed to be appropriate.

On the morning of the experimental day, the instructor remained in his office monitoring both Moodle for postings of the summaries, and also Gmail for requests for help. Surprisingly, one of the students knocked on the instructor's door to enquire whether he could use the computers in the classroom that was normally scheduled for the course. He explained that his modem was not working at home, and he was not able to access the Internet. Another student was also waiting in the regular classroom. He had come to school because his computer was not working. Likewise, he was unable to do anything without coming to school. The flexible nature of this course, however, catered for students who came to school as the location of study could be anywhere with an Internet connection.

By checking the times that summaries were posted to Moodle, it was evident that not all students finished before the deadline specified for the first lesson. When these students were questioned as to why they were late, reasons given were all

related to technical difficulties. As mentioned above, the students who had difficulties came to the university to work. Despite these challenges, however, all students were able to post their summaries albeit some were late.

The experimental lessons: Lesson Two

Although all students were able post their summaries, the flow of the lesson was negatively affected by the fact that group mates could not ask questions about a summary that had not been posted. This outcome was unfortunately a natural challenge associated with the intensive nature of the course. However, while monitoring the postings in real time, groups in which all students had successfully posted summaries worked well; students could be seen asking and answering questions throughout the lesson.

In situations where there was a low number of postings within a group on the Moodle forum, there was concern that students were not asking each other two questions as required; however, upon investigation, it became clear that, rather than writing two discrete questions and posting them separately, some postings actually contained two questions. Therefore, simply counting the number of postings was not an accurate indicator of the amount of work completed in all cases; instead, an instructor would need to open each posting to accurately ascertain the quantity of work that had been accomplished. It would be wise, therefore, to specify quite clearly how students should ask their questions and in what format because a count of the number of postings within a forum is one potentially useful monitoring tool. An interesting outcome was that even though some postings of summaries had been made past the deadline, all students made

a conscious effort to diligently ask and answer the required number of questions during the day. Despite this outcome, however, instructors should think carefully about deadlines and how they should be managed; for example, should students be allowed to post past any deadlines and should there be any penalties if they do?

The experimental lessons: Lesson Three

Writing a group summary about the listening lesson was an activity that was usually set for homework in previous courses. In years prior to the availability of Google Documents, students usually commented about how challenging this activity was with regard to collating each student's part of the summary. Whereas students had previously contributed their part of the work separately by using, for example, email or USB sticks, Google Documents was perfect for allowing students to collaboratively and synchronously contribute to all parts of the document whenever and wherever. In this regard, the activity worked extremely smoothly, and much better, in online mode.

It should be noted that one group of students decided to meet up at school for the two lessons in the afternoon. There were two main reasons for this decision: (a) one of the students was having technical issues with her computer, and, therefore, decided to use one of the school's computers instead and (b) the other group mates also decided to go to the university so that they could see each other and work face to face. As somebody who had a commute to the university in excess of two hours, and as somebody who could have possibly benefitted the most by working at home in terms of commuting time saved, it was surprising that the student who lived furthest from the university still happily came to school despite the need not to.

When questioned as to why she came to campus, she explained that she wanted to chat and see her friends in the group during break times. It was evident, therefore, that there was the potential for strong bonds to form with group mates, and a strong sense of responsibility. When designing any courses incorporating flexible learning, therefore, a course designer / instructor would be wise to take social factors into account to reduce any negative fears of isolation.

The experimental lessons: Lesson Four

By far the most challenging lesson of the day, students in groups had to create materials for a song-listening lesson comprising pre-, while and post- activities. In the same groups as the previous third lesson, students again used a Google Document to collaboratively create their materials. As per the lesson given previously to the experimental day, students had to agree on something to teach, choose a song, focus on the vocabulary, create a cloze activity, and then decide on a post-listening activity to elicit a reaction to the song and to stimulate critical discussion. Furthermore, with regard to materials design, students had to include a word cloud so that there was a focus on vocabulary before the cloze activity.

This activity was deemed to be challenging by the instructor as students had to collaboratively

- create a shared Google Document
- create a word cloud
- write up the materials
- post the finished document to Moodle.

Despite being a challenging activity in terms of both what the students had to do

and also how they were going to accomplish it collaboratively, there was only one call for help. In one group, none of the students were able to generate a Wordle either due to the age of their computer and/or the lack of certain software needed to generate the word cloud. Fortunately, while monitoring the Google Documents, the students were able to ask for help when they knew that the teacher was present, and the problem was easily resolved by the teacher generating a word cloud for the students using the words that they had chosen and supplied. Therefore, all groups were able to finish the lesson.

6. Research question two: Students' perceptions

In order to investigate research question 2, two questionnaires were developed. The first questionnaire was open-ended and administered to participants at the end of the course. Participants were asked to answer the following questions and give details:

- "What were the best / worst aspects of the experimental day?"
- "What are the advantages / disadvantages of this mode of study for you / students?"

Participants were then asked to comment on their perceived performance during the different activities, and also comment on the differences between a regular class and the online activities.

The second questionnaire probed for more specific details of the advantages and disadvantages of the various tasks. Due to space limitations, only the results of the bulleted questions above will be explored. The other questions may be explored in

more depth in a follow-up paper.

Results

There were 24 participants, but some mentioned more than one aspect for each of the questions.

i. Students' perceptions of the best aspects of the experimental day (27 responses)

The following codes emerged from the open ended question: "What were the best aspects of the experimental day?"(A summary of the responses are shown in Figure 9):

Convenience (18 responses, 67%)

Motivation (2 responses, 7%)

Way to read/write in English (3 responses, 11%)

Work with others (4 responses, 15%)

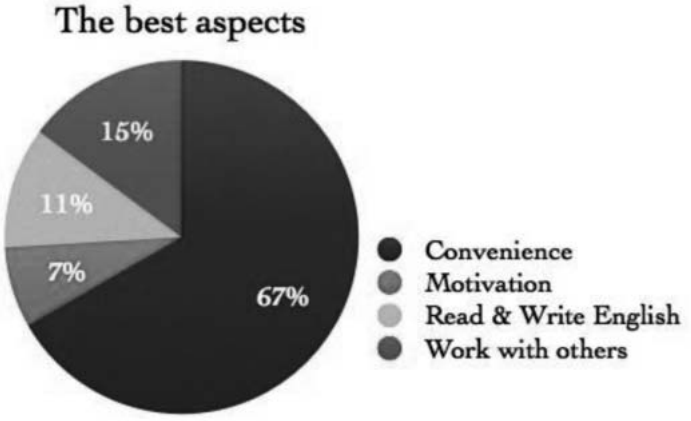


Figure 9 Students' perceptions of the best aspects of the experimental day

In terms of convenience, 13 participants (67%) mentioned the benefits of not having to be in the classroom at the same time in order to fulfil the task as one participant wrote: "We can work anywhere if we can access on the internet".

Other participants mentioned that the way they worked was more relaxed or that they could save time and money. One participant wrote: "First of all, I really enjoyed in this unique lesson. The best aspect was that I could work on lesson 1 and 2 at home without worry about the time when I may start and finish. Also, I worked without being hasty and being in hurry from what other people were doing."

In addition to being convenient, four students appreciated the way in which they could work with others. One participant wrote: "The best aspect was we could cooperate and did at the same time". Three participants mentioned that they could practice reading and writing (which is less usual in a classroom-based discussion) and two participants mentioned that working online was motivating. One participant wrote: "We could experience a new way, so it was fresh and we are motivated".

ii. Students' perceptions of worst aspects (25 responses)

The following codes emerged from the following open ended question: "What were the worst aspects of the experimental day?" (a summary is shown in Figure 10):

Couldn't communicate well: 5 responses (25%)
Technical issues: 7 responses (35%)

Waiting for group members to respond: 5 responses (25%)

Panic / confusion / lack of concentration: 3 responses (15%)

Other: 5 responses (discounted)

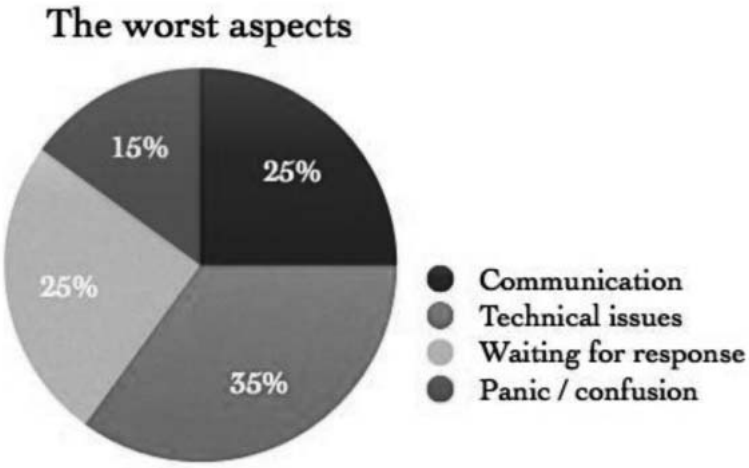


Figure 10 Students' perceptions of the worst aspects of the experimental day

Five participants mentioned the difficulty in communicating online. One participant wrote: "The worst aspect is we cannot communicate with friends easily". Another participant wrote: "The worst point was we couldn't talk with group members".

Technical issues accounted for seven of the responses. Most of the complaints related to computer speed. One participant wrote: "Worst aspect was that computers worked very slowly". Waiting for a response were reported to be one of the worst aspects for five participants. This included complaints that group members had not posted their contributions on time or replied to a question at all.

Three responses related to an element of confusion, for example, one participant said that he/she was confused at first. Another wrote that he/she found it difficult to concentrate.

Responses in the "other" category were mainly ones that were difficult to interpret, so were discounted. One student complained of eye strain and another commented that he/she did not have time for a break.

iii. Students perceptions of the advantages (28 responses)

The participants perceived the advantages of the mode of study to be as follows (see Figure 11 for a summary). Only factors not previously mentioned by the same students for the previous questions are included in this data.

Convenience: 17 (65%)

Way to share / work with others: 5 (19%)

Computer skills: 2 (8%)

Can concentrate: 2 (8%)

Unclear: 2 (discounted)

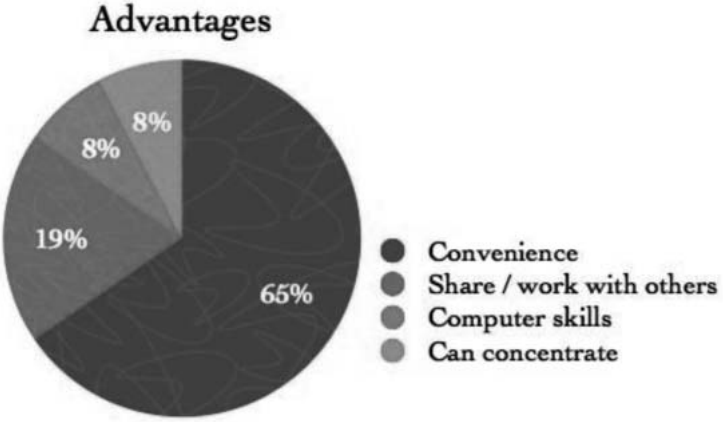


Figure 11 Aspects of flexible learning modes identified as "advantages"

Factors related to convenience were the most common. Many participants recognised the advantages of being able to work from anywhere. Two participants felt that this was more relaxing and two participants mentioned the fact that working this way enables a student to work at their own pace. One participant wrote: "I think the advantage is that students may work on their own pace and take their time without be disturbed by noise. And they can work anywhere they want if they have a PC."

Five participants mentioned the benefit of being able to share ideas or work with others, two participants mentioned the possibility of developing computer skills, and two students found that working this way was easier for them to concentrate.

iv. Students perceptions of the disadvantages (18 responses)

The disadvantages presented here only appear if they were not previously mentioned as a "worst aspect" by the same respondent. The disadvantages mentioned were as follows (also see Figure 12):

Not so easy to communicate: 5

Challenges of being alone: 4

Complaint about other students: 3

Wanted more speaking/ listening practice: 3

Anxiety: 2

Technology challenges: 1

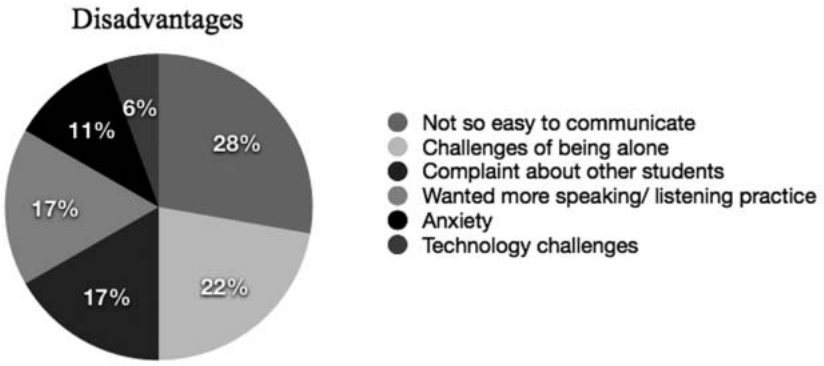


Figure 12 Aspects identified as "disadvantages"

Some students cited some disadvantages of working alone online. For example, one student wrote [it was] "difficult to keep motivation because the teacher wasn't there".

Participants cited some technology challenges previously mentioned by other students. One participant commented on the necessity to read and write text on a screen: “it’s troublesome to summarise a text on the screen - need to print out” which possibly indicates the level of comfort with using technology.

Three respondents complained about their classmates, for example, one student wrote: “if some students didn’t join on time, group members can’t finish”. Another disadvantage cited relates to communication difficulties. The comments indicated that students were unused to communicating in this way. One student noted “Communicating by writing means it's difficult to tell our real emotions”. Another wrote: “difficult to agree with each other”.

v. Location (24 responses)

One of the main reasons for offering flexible learning options is to give the students the possibility of working anywhere. Some students enrolled in the course had a two hour commute by train and the class took place in the middle of a very hot summer. The researchers assumed that most, of not all of the students would work from home. However, the questionnaire revealed that students worked at the following places (a summary is provided in Figure 13):

Home 13

Friends place 1

School 8

Home and school 1

Home, school and coffee shop 1

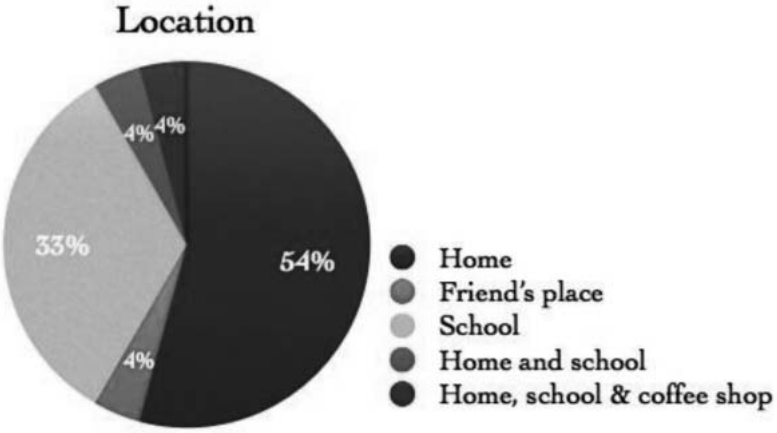


Figure 13 Students' location during the experimental day

7. Discussion

A number of observations can be drawn from the results. This section will outline some contributing to enrichment, and also discuss some of the challenges.

Enrichment

Almost all of the participants reported to have benefited in some way from participating in the online activities contained in the experimental day and many were very enthusiastic about the experience. There was evidence that the experience was enriching. For example, there was some evidence of learner developing a sense of autonomy. One student wrote: "we must be responsible and do the work". There was also evidence of cognitive engagement, for example, participants mentioned the need to "think deeply" and "share our thinking".

In addition, there was evidence of students finding benefit in learning from others, for example, “get writing skills and notice the other person’s way of writing” and “we can use the advice from others”. Finally, there was evidence that learners were reflecting on their learning, for example, one student wrote that it was a “chance to improve and notice mistakes”, and another noted that there were “many ideas and opinions”. Although this was a small study, the students’ comments indicate that offering course elements in this way would both enrich and enhance the learning experience.

Challenges

The main challenges relate to the technology and to the challenge of communicating online. Many students noted how slow some of the university computers were and some students were unable to work from home due to incompatible technology. A number of students commented on how difficult it was to communicate with someone via a computer. The students appeared to be largely unused to communicating in this way in the target language or even in Japanese.

Personal preference

Although students taking the class were willing to participate in the research, they had actually registered for a regular intensive class. Reactions towards the technology may reflect this and also some students reported to need a teacher present in order for them to be motivated to complete a task. Students were also

unfamiliar with the notion of credit-based learning taking place outside class. When offering courses including flexible learning options in the future, students will be aware of the expectations. This will ensure that they will not be uncomfortable studying off campus.

Familiarity and training

Many of the students were unfamiliar with using technology in this way and their comfort levels would increase over time. It is useful to keep this in mind when considering some of the disadvantages that the participants cite on the questionnaire. Ideally, there would have been time for sufficient training and introduction to the various tools. Being able to use the tools effectively for communication purposes should insure that students have strategies to increase the interaction opportunities and reduce the potential feeling of isolation that some students feared. It is also important to consider the help options available to students if and when they experience difficulties.

8. Conclusions

From observations and evidence suggested in the data, the researchers recommend that offering flexible learning options is a feasible option for KUIS. The activities are relatively easy to facilitate using Moodle and online tools. What will be more challenging is to adopt a blended learning model as an institution. As noted by Graham (2006) and Liu (2011), attention needs to be given at all levels if a blended learning model is to be successfully implemented; i.e. at the institutional level, the programme level, the course level and the activity level. In

addition, a suitable and uniform platform (i.e. Moodle) should be adopted by an institution in order to best facilitate this implementation. There will then be training implications for staff and students on the platform and various tools. More important than tool-specific training, should be in the introduction of the idea that technology is changing at a fast rate so any educator or learner needs to be comfortable with learning, relearning and staying up to date if they are going to take advantages of the affordances of technology as it becomes available.

9. Implications for KUIS

By offering students a flexible approach to their studies, students are provided with a number of choices. Should, however, students decide to study off campus, access to appropriate technology is crucial. However, even though students may already have computers, the dilemma for instructors is whether students can do what they need to do using the computers they have. Two issues arise here

(a) finding out what computers, software and applications students have would be impractical; it would essentially mean that all materials would have to be custom designed for individual students. Furthermore, instructors would ideally need to request this information well in advance of the start of any course so that appropriate materials could be developed. However, this request is again impractical given that instructors usually only meet their students for the first time at the start of courses

(b) materials development for instructors would be hindered if students had old or no computers.

To overcome such practical issues, two possibilities include

(a) students could be asked to purchase certain equipment or students could be provided with such equipment

(b) hardware / software minimum requirements could be published.

In summary, it was impossible for the instructor to know what software / applications could be used as students possessed different kinds of computers. If equipment were made standard among the students, however, these challenges would disappear as instructors would know exactly what could be achieved. Whether students have their own technology or not, it is clear that challenges will always arise. Crucial to the instructor's role in a flexible learning programme, therefore, is that challenges should be expected, and instructors and students alike should know what to do in these times of trouble. Instructors need to be aware of how to provide support to students and how to suggest alternative forms of study if certain routes fail. Furthermore, students also need to be aware of who they can contact for help. These issue are particularly acute if time is an issue as it would be in an intensive course.

Although flexible learning options are seen to be feasible, language courses at KUIS need to adopt a pedagogically sound policy for the use of technology to support such courses. Firstly, the English Language Institute has embraced a blended learning model of Language education but in a selective way. It is recommended that blended learning is adopted as a principle for all new courses.

Secondly, in order to support the needs of students, further institutional support is

needed. This support includes the provision of wide access to campus wifi, and also for suitable and up-to-date hardware to be made available to students (as mentioned above) and staff. Indeed, many institutions around the world are either requiring new students to purchase particular equipment such as a laptop or iPad, or issuing them on enrollment.

Finally, in order to ensure that language education at KUIS remains strongly grounded in pedagogy and meets the needs of the students, the use of technology needs to be an organic part of the overall curriculum structure. The English Language Institute is currently developing and implementing a new curriculum framework which draws on a literacies approach. The AIM framework (Awareness, Interaction, Multiliteracies) emphasises the appropriate use of technology as an integral part. The Computer Assisted Language Learning Research Group (one of the research groups in the ELI) have been conducting research and have developed some guidelines for the integration of CALL within the AIM framework.

This is an exciting time to be in the field of language education, and more technological advances are meaning increased opportunities for learning enhancement, enrichment and flexibility.

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