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Alleviating the senses of isolation and alienation in the virtual world: Socialization in distance education

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Abstract

The magnitude of distance education in today's pedagogical businesses is irrefutable. Implementation of discussion forums in distance learning has a profound impact on learners' achievement and it is highly recommended (Rose & Ray, 2011; Shana, 2009). There should be social, teaching, and cognitive presence in an online educational community (Tucker, 2012). On a web-based discussion forum, learners can socialize, make pen pals, receive comments from teachers, and learn in groups in a virtual community. Adaptive and collaborative online discussion forums are already used by multifarious English learning websites; nonetheless, apparently, it is not implemented by English language centers in Malaysia. The study aims to examine English learners' readiness to use online discussion forums (oral and verbal communication). A dual moderator focus group was used to conduct the study. Whilst some of the questions were arisen from the factors demonstrated in the modified technology acceptance model (TAM) in E-learning (Masrom, 2007), the others were brought by the participants themselves. The discussions were transcribed and the collected data were coded, reduced, and displayed to draw the conclusion. As an outstanding result of the qualitative exploratory research, English learners expressed a strong desire to use web-based discussion forums. Thus, an online discussion board will possibly increase the online participation of English learners. The outcome of this study elaborates on the key success factors in the implementation of E-learning as an online service marketing tool which results in augmentation of the future user numbers, amplification of learner e-loyalty and retention, attracting more potential clients, increase in learner satisfaction level, and profitability of English language centers in Malaysia. Furthermore, implementation of web-based discussion forums might be a contributing factor to ameliorate the predicament of isolation and alienation in addition to meet the English (language) learners' need for socialization on the Internet.

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1. Introduction

Online learning communities have become immensely popular in recent years, and it has led to an increasing number of researches in this subject area (Tsai, 2012). In an online learning community which can be formed by implementing a web-based forum on the Internet, English language learners are provided with a platform where learners can communicate and learn from each other apart from what they learn from their teachers. Regarding the fact that the location does not matter on the Internet, everybody, anytime, in any location can use the Internet as a learning tool. On an Internet forum (message board) learners can make pen pals from other countries and communicate with them in English whether it is written language by typing or oral language by recording voices

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on the forums. Languages and cultures in an international environment is recommended as there are lots of advantages that learners can take (Fryer, 2012), online language learning communities can be considered a great place with rich international learning atmosphere. There can be even more forums with specific purposes e.g. grammar forum, vocabulary forum, essay writing forums or there might be forums for free discussion where learners can talk about anything they like to practice their English language. According to the news.netcraft.com's released results of the conduct web server survey in the July 2012, there are 665,916,461 Web sites on the Internet ("Web Server Survey," 2012). Aside from the dramatic increase in the population of the world (70-80 mil/year) (Sazmand-Asfaranjan & Ziaei-Moayyed, 2012), the number of Internet users is being increased as well as the number of websites. Internet marketers wish to bring traffic to their websites using numerous online marketing strategies. User satisfaction can be considered the best way to bring traffic to a website and make it more popular by positive word of month on the Internet. The question is that how users/learners can be satisfied. For the last decades, there has been a marked shift from traditional face-to-face teaching to modern teaching methods using high-tech devices such as smart phones, laptops, and tablets. Nowadays, e-learning and mobile learning is becoming more and more popular and pedagogical researchers wish to study to make improvements in the systems. The question is that how learners can be motivated to use the new teaching and learning systems. It is undoubtedly clear that the need for friendship/social needs is a deficiency need and more vital than a need for education/learning which is a growth need (self-actualization) based on Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (Huitt, 2007). Regarding the popularity of social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook and Twitter, it is readily predictable that Internet users tend to socialize on the Internet as a virtual community as the SNS are being used more than the other websites. Using alexa.com, it can be noticed that the factor of socialization is in most of top popular websites on the Internet. In recent years, multimedia-based e-learning becomes more popular as text-based e-learning might result in boredom and disengagement in learners (Zhang, Zhao, Zhou, & Nunamaker Jr, 2004). However, there is still something missing in some e-learning systems which is lack of socialization. Human beings need to make friends with each other and socialize; they learn from each other.

It was predicted that in the 21st century preparing students to participate in a knowledge-based economy plays a crucial role in education as knowledge will be considered a vital resource for social and economic advance (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). It is also predictable that the number of online students will be increased dramatically as individuals can get more attention from instructors in an online environment, there is much time to think and response online. Online learners are being offered with customized learning services and they can study on their own pace which are the other advantages of online learning. In addition, learning about technology can be considered a byproduct of online learning. A learning community enhances the learners' academic achievements (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999) and it improves education for the future (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999) as it reconceptualized the educational practice in classrooms (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). A research aimed to re-culture schools to become learning communities (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002). Communication on the net promotes learning amongst learners who are challenged by linguistic and cultural considerations (Teikmanis & Armstrong, 2001). There is an increasing number of book on online learning communities (Cashion & Palmieri, 2000; Fontana, 1997; Ground, 2004; Luppacini, 2007) and how it online learning communities can be successful (Harasim, 2002).

A virtual community is defined as a group of individuals who have the same interest and communicate online so that they can share their knowledge and learn from each other (Liu & Zhang, 2012). Interaction is vital in online courses and online learnings (Swan, 2002). The effectiveness of online discussion boards was discussed (Levine, 2007) by increasing the number of online communities. There might be learner-learner and/or learner-instructor interaction in online learning environments, however, there should be teaching presence in online learning communities and online classrooms (Jones, 2011). Telephone conversations, web-based conferencing (that might include video conferencing), text-based communication such as online chats and discussion boards can be used as learning tools on the Net. Based on numerous researches, it can be said that a lack social interaction of student and their feelings of isolation negatively influence their academic achievement and it is

even evident in distance education (Tsai, 2012). Online marketers desire to make the online users/learners loyal as there are studies that examine the factors influencing loyalty behavior in virtual communities with earning purposes (Lin, 2010).

2. Materials and methods

A focus group, a sort of group interview (Kitzinger, 1995), which is a great tool to conduct educational research (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) and also a widespread technique in marketing research (Calder, 1977) was used to conduct this exploratory educational marketing study. Analyzing the qualitative data is not straightforward but it is challenging and the process of data analysis can be started when merely some of the data have been gained (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). Although analyzing focus group data is challenging (Rabiee, 2004), the data gathered from a focus group can be analyzed the same way the other qualitative data are analyzed (Kitzinger, 1995; Vaughn et al., 1996). The study, as an exploratory research, was conducted to measure the possibility of implementation of web-based discussion forum to promote socialization in e-learning systems in English language learning in Malaysia. It is aimed to scrutinize the English learners' readiness to use online discussion forums. Regarding the topic of the research and the limitation in terms of time and budget, a group of eight participants was selected and arranged for a one-hour discussion regarding the topic. In this study informants should have been experienced in using e-learning for learning the English language to provide the researchers with adequate and precise information. In addition, the informants should have studied in an English language center in Malaysia. As there was no access to the sample frame probability sampling could not be used. Among non-probability samplings, judgment sampling was chosen to select the participants. Based on judgment sampling design eight participants with two requirements (1- those who have studied English language in a language center in Malaysia 2- those who have experienced learning English using e-learning systems) were selected. The type of focus group was dual moderator in which one moderate ensure that everything in the session was going OK and the other one ensure that all the topics are covered in the discussion. The discussion lasted one hour and there was one facilitator who wrote down the points, ideas, opinions at the session.

A focus group consists of 8 participants was conducted to provide a general insight into what online English language learners in Malaysia look for. Participants were selected based on their expertise and experience in using websites as English language learning tools. The discussion session lasted around an hour. Normally, focus group consists of a group of informants (8 to 10) that gather to discuss either an issue or a product which lasts approximately two hours and is led by a moderator (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). However, in this study, there were two moderators, who were carefully selected based on their expertise in the topic or experience the issue on which information is needed. One moderator made sure that the session was going smooth while the other one made sure that all the topics were covered. Since recording the voices might make bias in the study regarding the fact that participants might not say what they actually want to mention (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). Thus, there was one facilitator who wrote down the important part of the discussion during the session. In 2009, Sekaran and Bougie uses an original approach to qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) which says that there are three phases namely, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions based on two former steps which ease the understanding. First and foremost, the data were selected, coded and categorized in the process of data reduction. Collecting qualitative data provided the researchers with large amount of data which needed to be reduced to avoid confusion. As the second key activity in data analysis, the data were organized and condensed (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sekaran & Bougie, 2009) in a table. In the last phase of qualitative data analysis, it was attempted to draw conclusions based on the the selected, categorized, coded, and categorized data provided after the last two steps.

3. Results and discussion

TAM, which stands for the Technology Acceptance Model, is well-known for being commonly used as a framework to explore online users' technology usage behaviors (Davis, 1989). Davis model of TAM was modified later on to be applicable in E-learning studies (Masrom, 2007). Perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness which influence the attitudes of learners to use the e-learning systems (Masrom, 2007) was indirectly discussed in the session. The participants all mentioned the fact that they have found online discussion forums useful. English-test.net was an example that participants mentioned. Five participants mentioned that they have used online forums on English-test.net and expressed strong desire to use the same discussion forums implemented by English language centers in Malaysia. Participants mentioned the websites on the Internet that they used as a virtual community. They were satisfied with the websites with online discussion forums as they could record their voice and get responds in forms of messages ad voices recorded. They have made pen pals and made appointment on Skype, yahoo to practice their speaking online. They received feedback from the teacher of English anytime, anywhere, and quickly. The revealed the fact that the virtual community motivated them to learn and study more and more. The factors that have made online learners demotivated to use the English language websites of the centers are mentioned in the following table.

Table 1. Factors that make online language learners demotivated in using e-learning implemented by English language center in Malaysia

Factor - Code	Example	Number Agreed	% Agreed	Solutions
Isolation	I cannot make friends/pen pals and practice my English language online by using those language learning websites	7	87.5 %	
Alienation	On the Net, you do not know who you are talking to and it is tough to make friends online. However, it would be enjoyable to practice your English language with your classmates online	7	87.5 %	1. Online Learning Community 2. Web-Based Discussion Forums (which also enables learners to record their voice and listen to the other recorded voices)
Boredom	E-learning is boring as there is no interaction	8	100 %	
Loneliness	Using the the Internet for language learning makes me feel lonely even if there is a good quality multimedia-based e-learning	6	75 %	3. Online Message Board

The helpful results of the focus group discussion which were helpful in this research are summarized and categorized in the table 1.

4. Conclusion and suggestions

There is a dramatic increase in the utilization of virtual communities as foreign language learning tools on the Internet, the most recent study already demonstrated (Liu & Zhang, 2012). This study lay stress on how vital the role of socialization is in online learning. Based on the results of the focus group, it is evident that language learners desire to learn from each other more than learning from instructors. They feel they learn more from peers compared to what they learn from language teachers. Regarding the fact that SNS (social networking sites) such as Facebook, Twitters, Friendster, My Space and LinkedIn are regarded as the most popular websites on the Internet. It can be readily concluded that people like to socialize with each other make friends and communicate on the Net. Thus, socialization factor can be considered the most vital factor in online learning and it can be fulfilled by implementing web-based discussion forums where learners can socialize with each other. Creating value for customers is important even in virtual communities (Misra, Mukherjee, & Peterson, 2008). Providing a platform where learners can learn in groups, and socialize with each other on the Internet is not only a value

creation activity, but it is also a competitive advantage which differentiates the website with the other English learning websites. Therefore, the factor of socialization in an English learning website can make the website more popular and attract more users/language learners. It can be said that online discussion forums/boards can make learners more satisfied which leads to positive word of mouth on the internet and the result in learner e-loyalty. There will be a higher online satisfaction level that helps the website owners to keep the existing online learner and attract potential online learners which leads to a bigger market share and profitability of English language centers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The result of the study is partially similar to another two study recent study in 2012 which emphasizes the importance of social presence in online learning (Tsai, 2012; Tucker, 2012). It was shown that online learners' satisfaction is affected by a number of social constructs (Tsai, 2012). Nonetheless, regarding the fact that only 8 participants were accessible in the study and most commonly focus group is used in triangulation of mixed studies, there might be some inaccuracy in the results. In depth interviews with experienced learners is suggested in future studies and even there can be quantitative studies afterwards.

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