Student and teacher trial and perceptions of an online ESL academic writing unit

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Abstract

This paper describes a research study conducted in the spring semester of 2010, where an online writing unit developed by the authors was implemented in ESL academic writing classes. We developed and revised following peer trial a three-week unit for the compare-and-contrast type essay within the Moodle course management system. The unit consists of a series of assignments and tasks that would normally occur in an onsite writing classroom but with modifications made in an attempt to successfully migrate the same syllabus and teaching strategies from an onsite environment to an online environment. Thus, our unit incorporates various technologies and resources available both within and outside of Moodle. The unit was trialed in three sections of an ESL academic writing course for international undergraduate students at a major research university in the US. Data were collected through pre, during, and post questionnaires regarding students’ preferences for online/distance learning and perceptions of their experiences while using the online unit. Another source of data consisted of semi-structured interviews with students and instructors. Findings from our study are discussed, followed by suggestions for further research and implications for online ESL writing course development.

1. Introduction

Online writing courses are becoming increasingly prevalent in US colleges and universities as an

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option not only for distance learners but also for students on campus. Numerous benefits are associated with teaching writing online, the most important being that, as proposed by Warnock (2009), online writing courses force an environment on students that is "not just writing intensive but also often writing exclusive" (p. xi). Such a learning environment can promote more writing practice opportunities for students, as well as enable “easy dissemination, sharing, and revising of texts” (p. xii).

However, most online course development endeavors to date have focused on teaching native speakers of English, and attempts to develop online writing courses specifically for ESL students have been scarce. There is thus a need to investigate whether the benefits of online writing instruction that have been proposed for native speaker students would also apply to ESL learners. Furthermore, in response to the concerns of writing teachers over teaching writing exclusively online, we were interested in learning how the students and teachers who will be the real users of the online writing unit we developed would feel about the unit; that is, 1) what aspects of the unit the students and teachers saw as beneficial or not, and 2) how the students’ and teachers’ trial of the unit affected their perceptions of learning or teaching ESL writing online.

2. Method

2.1. Development stage

A three-week online ESL writing unit on the compare-and-contrast essay type was developed by the researchers in Fall 2009. It was designed to be used as a part of an existing onsite academic writing course for international undergraduate students based on three design principles: 1) process-based writing, 2) “migration” of activities (Warnock, 2009), and 3) learning community.

The main approach to the teaching of writing in our online unit is process-based, as in the original onsite course on which the unit is modeled. The students went through the process of generating information, brainstorming, writing multiple drafts, and peer response. In addition, the activities in the onsite course were migrated to our online unit based on our theoretical belief that teaching online involves a change of scene while still maintaining the teaching practices and pedagogies that have worked well in onsite classrooms (Warnock, 2009). In particular, our unit makes extensive use of message boards as a forum for online discussions and feedback exchange. According to Levine (as cited in Warnock, 2009), message boards or forums “support higher-order constructivist learning and the development of a learning community” (p. 92).

The unit was developed in Moodle, a course management system, and students were expected to spend four to five hours per week using it. Instructions on what to do each week were clearly stated in the course website. Some of the distinct migrated activities include forum discussions, audio and picture presentations, narrated PowerPoint lectures, online peer response, and online office hours. The unit was peer-trialed by two of our colleagues and revised based on their feedback.

2.2. Implementation stage

The revised online unit was implemented in Spring 2010 over four weeks, including a one-week break. Three sections of the onsite ESL academic writing course for international undergraduate students participated in our study, a total of 43 students and three instructors. The students took the course during the semester as they normally would, except for the three-week unit on the compare and contrast essay, which they took completely online through Moodle.

The student participants in the three sections first filled out a questionnaire for background information and their perceptions of and experiences with online/distance learning, both for general learning and for
language learning. Questionnaires were developed with reference to Green and Youngs (2001) and Ushida (2005). Students followed the schedule of the online unit and completed the assignments and tasks.

During the online unit, students were asked once a week about their experiences and opinions of the online activities through a short online poll that took them about five minutes. After the online unit, students filled out a questionnaire on their experiences and perceptions of the online unit and of online learning. Two of the students agreed to participate in a 20-minute semi-structured interview with the researchers regarding their perceptions of the online unit. Interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder to be transcribed later by the researchers.

The researchers met with the instructors before the beginning of the online unit to assist in the teaching. Instructors were interviewed four times by the researchers over the course of the three-week period (once before the unit, twice during, and once afterwards). The 15-minute semi-structured interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey results. Interviews were transcribed, and content analysis was conducted to analyze short answers from the questionnaires and the interview transcripts.

3. Results and discussion

Research question 1: What aspects of the unit did the students and teachers see as being (or not being) beneficial?

According to the end-of-week questionnaires, the students’ average ratings of the individual activities ranged from 3 to 3.5 on a 5-point scale where 1 means poor and 5 means great. There was a tendency for students to give ratings around the middle point. The short responses on the students’ post-questionnaires and the interview transcripts revealed that they saw the convenience of time and place, ease of use, and interaction with classmates in forums and the peer response workshop as the strengths of the unit. However, the students pointed out that there was less communication with the teacher, particularly immediate answers to questions and solutions to problems. They also found some instructions confusing and did not see the direct connection of a couple of tasks to the essay assignment.

The teachers, on the other hand, saw the students’ use of language (the unit being “writing intensive”) and enjoyment of exchanging comments, and the lectures that students could go back to as some of the unit’s strengths. However, they commented on the inconvenience of providing feedback in the Moodle system and the difficulty of a few tasks for the students.

Research question 2: How did the students’ and teachers’ trial of the unit affect their perceptions of learning or teaching ESL writing online?

According to the questionnaires, there was no change in the students’ preference for learning environment from pre- to post-unit trial. Students rated a blended learning system first, onsite second, and online third. The comparison of students’ short answer responses on the pre- and post-questionnaires revealed that after the unit, students were able to articulate in more detail about which learning environment they preferred and why. They also seemed to have a clearer idea of the pros and cons of online learning vs. onsite learning. We think that the students see hybrid courses as being a compromise or a best of both worlds, and perhaps that is why they rated hybrid courses the highest.

Similarly, the unit did not have much effect in changing the teachers’ preferences for teaching environment. The difference with the students is that the teachers rated onsite the most, hybrid second, and online third. The interviews told us that teachers very much like the personal interaction and face-to-face, on-the-spot feedback that can happen in an onsite course. They felt that the online unit did not give them a chance for sufficient interaction with the students. The teachers also experienced challenges with
the technology; one teacher, for instance, expressed her frustration over how the technology deterred her in a way from actually teaching the students.

4. Conclusion

We believe that this study has given students the opportunity to experience online learning and thus enabled them to make informed decisions in the future when enrolling in courses. Teachers were also given a chance to experience online teaching, and we hope that they are better prepared for future teaching assignments. Lastly, we feel that the development and implementation of our unit has demonstrated the feasibility of migrating activities from onsite to online.

Some limitations of our study with regard to study design include: 1) low participation rate in weekly surveys, 2) few student interviews, and 3) short length of the unit. We also did not compare the effects of the online unit vs. onsite learning on writing skills. Our suggestions for further research relate to: 1) using anonymous learning logs as an additional data collection method, 2) working with a different population of students, 3) using a Likert scale with 4 or 6 points in the questionnaires, and 4) investigating the effect of online teacher persona on student learning. Finally, some implications for online writing course development are: 1) to clearly state the goal for each activity along with detailed instructions for students, 2) to make available to students and teachers tutorials on the various technologies used in the course, 3) to provide teacher training on technology, and 4) to look into more efficient ways for teachers to give feedback on student work.

References

