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The Teaching and Learning of English For Academic Purposes in Blended Environment
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Abstract

Learners and educators worldwide have been exposed to new information and communication technologies in order to stimulate and further enhance the learning process. The introduction of blended learning environment using learning management system (LMS) chosen by universities can indeed bring about positive impact on students’ performance in their studies. This study was a blended learning pilot project for English for Academic Purposes. This study examined the students’ perception, engagement and performance in the blended learning environment. A total of 963 students and 23 lecturers of Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka took part in this study for the July–November 2010 academic semester. The study was both exploratory and experimental in nature. A set of questionnaire was used to gather students’ perception, examination of students and lecturers’ interaction in i-discussion was done to determine students’ engagement and t-tests were carried out to seek the difference of students’ performance between the blended learning group and the face-to-face group. Results of frequency count from the questionnaire showed that the students viewed blended learning positively. There were also signs of engagement in the learning environment from the examination of i-discussion. However, their reservation was on the lack of technical support and the inefficiency of the LMS system. As for the students’ performance, it was reported that there was no significant difference between students who involved in blended learning and those students who did not. Based on the analysis of this study, a number of implications have been drawn regarding the use of blended learning in the EAP course suggesting that, blended learning is a viable method to be utilized for this course.

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1. Introduction

Blended learning environment is relatively new in Malaysian tertiary education system. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) define blended learning as a combination of a traditional face-to-face instructional method and an online learning component with an online management tools. In 2003 Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) introduced the e-learning or on-line learning programme whereby it offers a combination of a variety of learning methods which consist of study materials, additional reference materials, lecturer support, forum interaction and discussion between students as well as face-to-face seminars. Eventually, the programme that was initiated for the distance education programme (e-PJJ) was introduced to full-time students. With the advent of i-Learn, a learning management system (LMS) built by UiTM, full-time students began to experience the so-called blended learning. This paper attempts to discuss an aspect of blended learning that is students’ perception and engagement towards the online mode when used to teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as well as the students’ performance in the environment.

1.1. English for Academic Purposes

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a course offered to part three (3) Diploma students of UiTM with an aim to prepare students to meet the academic demands of their respective discipline specifically in speaking, reading and writing skills. In this course, students are trained to employ the necessary language skills and strategies to carry out their academic tasks such as oral academic discussion, reading academic materials and writing academic assignments. The teaching methods are basically lecture, discussion, presentation and classroom exercises for reading and writing. A major project for the course is an academic term paper that takes the approach of process writing whereby in order to complete the project, the students are expected to come up with multiple writing drafts starting from an outline to a final approved draft by the lecturer. Hence, there is a lot of interaction among group members and with the lecturer in and out of the classroom. This paper therefore specifically looks at the completion of the writing task in a blended environment as a whole and specifically the online environment.

1.2. Statement of Problem

The idea of introducing blended learning to the EAP course was initiated when the campus faced the problem of physical classroom due to the number of growing students in UiTM Melaka. Since the course offered naturally requires a lot of discussion, submission and resubmission of an assignment, blended learning comes in as a perfect solution to at least minimize the problem. However, the faculty was aware that it is important to understand the true impact the online environment has on education especially on students. Therefore, this paper will investigate the students’ perception towards blended learning environment and the level of engagement students dedicate to the online portion of a blended course and eventually how these perception and engagement are translated into their performance.

1.3. Objective of the Study

This paper seeks to investigate students’ level of perception towards the blended learning environment in relation to writing task. This study also seeks to examine and analyze students’ engagement in the online portion of blended environment in completing a given writing task. Last but not least, to look at the performance of students in blended learning environment. The followings are the research questions:

• What are the students’ perceptions towards the blended learning approach in the EAP course?
How frequent do students participate in on-line discussion through i-Learn portal?
How do the students use the blended learning environment to help them in completing their writing task?
Is there a significant difference between the performance of students who did blended learning and students who did not?

This study is expected to add to the body of knowledge about blended learning, hence to provide instructional designers with better understanding about what works and what does not regarding the design and the development of a blended course. Finally, the findings too will be useful in helping decision makers determine the needs for the development and expansion of the blended learning methodology in university settings.

2. Literature Review

Over the past decades, studies have been conducted on online learning. Gagne and Shepherd (2001) and Schulman and Sims (1995) claim that students can be successful in learning in an online environment as in a traditional setting. A report by Garland and Martin (2005) however claims that information transfer and cognitive learning could be accomplished faster and better online than through traditional delivery method. This is because activities such as consensus building and group projects often incorporated into online courses, engage students in activities through which learners can develop skills at collaborating and cooperating with diverse individuals.

There are also several disadvantages of online learning as argued by Huang and Zhou (2005), firstly technical problems and lack of technical supports. Bad internet service can also hamper their learning process. Another problem is the requirement of good writing and typing skills due to the nature of online environment that mostly involves text-based communication tools. Moreover, students also have problem managing time and studying independently. Finally, students also may suffer from distress in online learning environment (Hara & Kling, 2000).

2.1. The Advantages of Blended Learning

Blended learning setting is viewed as the best setting of both worlds, online and face-to-face, can offer. It combines the online learning setting without losing the face-to-face interaction contact (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003) as “The goal of these hybrid courses is to join the best features of in-class teaching with the best features of online learning to promote active, self-directed learning opportunities with added flexibility” (Vaughan, 2007:82).

The first advantage of blended learning is that is a promising method for future educational programmes and gives advantages to learners, administrators and instructors (Dziuban, Hartman, Juge, Moskal & Sorg (2005). It is cost effective in terms of infrastructures as well as maintenance of classroom buildings (Salmon & Lawless, 2005). In addition, instructors are also optimistic about blended learning setting because they are able to learn more about their students. The combination of various materials customized to the needs of the learners is another advantage. The online method can be between two face-to-face meetings or used before and after the face-to-face meetings, hence materials suitable for online delivery are carried over the internet while others are presented in the traditional setting (Graham, 2006).

Lee and Chong (2007) also revealed how blended approach matched perfectly to the demanding nature of studies. Similarly, Pereira et al (2007) found a clear improvement in the academic performance of students who were taught via blended learning. Orhan (2007) also found that learners are able to improve their self-regulatory strategy in blended learning. On the quality of blended learning, Askar and Atun (2008) proposed a model by aggregation by which blended learning reflects all the aspects of the model
that are related to satisfaction: learner-learner interaction, learner-teacher interaction, online environment, technical support, printed materials, and face-to-face environment. Finally, Lim, Morris and Kupritz’s (2009) concluded that instructional delivery format may not affect learners’ learning or application of learning to a significant degree.

2.2. Students’ Interaction in Online Learning

Interaction is a vital component in building a successful learning experience. Since blended learning environment offers the combination of both face-to-face and online interaction, the participants in this method of learning environment have both the advantages. Learner-content interaction, learner-learner interaction or learner-instructor interaction can all determine students’ success or failure in the learning process, thus interaction is the critical indicator to determine the success of online education. Wagner (1998) as cited in Bailey (2002) identified 12 outcomes needed for successful online interaction: interaction for participation; interaction for communication; interaction for feedback; interaction for elaboration; interaction for learner control; interaction for motivation; interaction for negotiation; interaction for team-building; interaction for discovery; interaction for exploration; interaction for clarification; and interaction for closure.

2.3. Students’ Perception of online learning environment in blended learning

Students’ perception is related to the experience and education received in educational institution and the perception can either be positive or negative. Since the introduction of Web-based instruction, many studies have been conducted to view students’ perception of online learning environment. According to Jones (2003) and Carey and Gregory (2002), researchers have reported that web-based education is perceived as a satisfying experience for students. In addition, Hisham Dzakiria, Che Su Mustafa and Hassan Abu Bakar’s (2006) suggest that the extent or the importance of learning support influences the students’ overall perceptions of their teaching and learning experience. Another study by Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz Soylu (2006) demonstrated that the more students participated in the forum and the higher their achievement level, the more positive they were towards the blended learning environment. Suleie and Lesjak (2007) also proved that the acceptability of the mode has a statistically significant influence on the acquired knowledge and improves study efficiency. Raihan (2010) also found that the learners’ perception towards the blended learning environment was positive, thus encouraged them to engage in their learning that was subsequently translated into their good performance.

2.4. Students’ Engagement

Students’ engagement in learning refers to the time and effort a student invested in educational activities; the psychological investment in learning. In other words, they take pride in the formal indicators of success and also in understanding the material and incorporating and internalising what they have learnt. This implies that when a student involves in his or her study, he or she is actually engaged in his or her own learning. Jones, Valdes, Nowakowski and Rasmussen (1994) claim that, besides having the skill to work with others, engaged students know how to transfer knowledge to solve problems creatively and they become self-motivated (Wasserstein, 1995, Eccles & Wigfield, 2002 and Carini, Kuhn & Klein, 2006).
3. Methodology

The study was conducted in Universiti Teknologi MARA Kampus Alor Gajah Melaka. The blended learning method was initially decided upon the lack of physical classroom, nonetheless the decision was not done without giving any thought to the implementation. Firstly, the EAP course was chosen over other language courses since the nature of the course is discussion and consultation. Next, the 23 lecturers who signed up for blended learning had to undergo an 8-hour required i-Learn course. The lecturers were also assisted in determining the content and materials for blended learning. The emphasis for the online interaction was but not restricted to the writing component since academic writing requires students to integrate reading.

3.1. Participants

The participants for this study were 963 (from a total of 1018) part three (3) diploma students who enrolled in various programmes taking the EAP course as a compulsory language course in semester July – October 2010. They had six contact hours with a four-hour face-to-face mode and a two-hour online mode. The EAP course ran for 14 weeks, however only 10 weeks were accounted for. The students were taught the various writing skills and had to go through the process of topic selection, gathering suitable and relevant materials in relation to the topic chosen, drafting an outline, writing the first draft and finally writing the final draft.

3.2. Research Design

This study is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative design. An exploratory approach was taken to determine the students’ perception towards and engagement in blended learning and the data were analyzed qualitatively. In determining the students’ performance, an experimental approach was done to compare the performance between the blended learning group (experimental) and the face-to-face group (controlled). The instruments used were as follows;

3.2.1. i-discussion

In the portal, i-discussion is the virtual space where participants of blended learning have their interaction among members of a registered group and with the lecturer. The i-discussion pages of 10 weeks were printed so that the discussion content (effort) can be analyzed. There was also a summary log to check the number of posts (time) each students had in i-discussion.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

A questionnaire adapted from Raihan (2010) was used in this study. The questionnaire was completed during class by a total of 363 students taking part in this study in week 14. The questionnaire consisted of 40 five-point Likert-type items from strongly disagree to strongly agree (negative to positive), divided into four categories, namely teacher’s role as a facilitator and an evaluator (1-12), online interaction (13-22), blended learning course (23-33), and online interaction and writing task (34-40).
3.2.3. Written Drafts and Final Examination

Students were to complete an academic writing task of approximately 700 words. The duration to complete the task was 9 weeks. Students were free to choose any expository genre and academic topic of their interest. The first draft would be graded and returned. Later, students revised their draft and submitted it as a second draft for evaluation. The marks of the second (final) drafts of both participant and non-participant groups will be statistically analyzed using the independent t-test to find if there is any significant difference between the two groups’ performance. The same statistical test was also used to analyze the difference between the two groups’ performance in the final exam for the writing section. Lastly, the passing rates of the two groups were also compared.

4. Results and Discussions

The data obtained from i-discussion, questionnaire, results of the term paper and final examination were analysed to determine students’ perceptions towards blended learning and students’ engagement in blended learning as well as students’ performance in blended learning.

4.1. Students’ Perceptions towards Blended Learning

The students’ perceptions towards blended learning approach are divided into four categories namely lecturer’s role as facilitator and evaluator, online interaction, blended learning course and online interaction and writing task. Table 1 summarizes the results from the questionnaire.

Table 1. Students’ Perceptions Towards Blended Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories / Scale</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>neutral</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer’s role as facilitator and evaluator</td>
<td>0.37%</td>
<td>2.43%</td>
<td>16.92%</td>
<td>61.64%</td>
<td>18.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Interaction</td>
<td>8.13%</td>
<td>9.12%</td>
<td>34.44%</td>
<td>35.76%</td>
<td>12.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended Learning Course</td>
<td>7.61%</td>
<td>13.75%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>32.96%</td>
<td>9.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Interaction and Writing Task</td>
<td>7.48%</td>
<td>13.22%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>38.25%</td>
<td>7.71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that 80.28% of students have positive perception towards the role of the lecturers as facilitator and evaluator in this blended learning course. They agreed that the lecturers had successfully attend to their needs such as responding to questions and queries within 24 hours, providing assistance, guidance and resources through online interaction and grading their papers. The fact that students were meeting the lecturers face-to-face and having the chance of online interaction added value to the lecturers’ role. For the online interaction category, students also show a decline towards positive perception (48.32%). Only 17.25% of the students have negative perception towards online interaction. The other 34.44% have a neutral opinion. However, from individual statements in this category, students noted that they were satisfied with online interaction mainly because they were able to express themselves without worry over the language structures and forms whereas they were not satisfied with the technical aspect of online interaction mainly access issue. This finding is similar to the finding of Huang and Zhou.
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(2005), who named technical problems and lack of technical supports as the disadvantages of online learning. However, in this study, students also noted that they received a lot of technical support from their lecturers (48.21%) and this is understood because students had the chance to seek for guidance when they met their lecturers face-to-face. Furthermore, since blended learning combines traditional and online environments, the instrument reflects all the aspects of the interaction aggregation model proposed by Askar and Atun’s (2008).

The third category seeks to find students perception towards blended learning course in terms of likeness, motivation and positive impact. Table 1 shows that the students’ perception towards this category is also positive (42.20%) while only 21.38% have negative perception. The other 36.4% are neutral. A direct question on whether the students like blended learning received a high percentage of 62.26% on the agree scale. This result is in line with the results in the study by Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz Soylu (2006) and Raihan (2010) that students were positive towards blended learning environment.

This EAP course focuses mainly on writing and the lecturers too emphasized on the skill in the online interaction. From Table 1, 45.56% of the students have positive perception that online interaction has positive impact on their writing task. Individual items covered areas such as working online in completing the task, making decision and managing their task online. In addition, a question that asked if their writing skill improved by online interaction, 44.63% agreed.

In summary, the students’ perceptions towards blended learning were positive in all four aspects namely the lecturers’ role, online interaction, blended learning course and online interaction and writing task. All the findings echo the idea that the integration of online learning and face-to-face learning allows for better learning as the two learning modes complement each other as cited in Osguthorpe and Graham, (2003), Vaughan (2007), Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz Soylu (2006) and Askar and Atun (2008) among others.

4.2. Frequency of Students’ Participation in Online Discussion

Students’ involvement in online discussion is analysed through the discussion they had with group members and lecturers in i-discussion. One of the aspects of involvement analysed was interaction frequency (time). A total of 13700 interactions were recorded in the summary log of i-discussion over 10 lecture weeks. Therefore, there were 1370 interactions per week with an average of 1 to 2 interactions per student per week. There were instances when some students had more than the average frequency of interaction in a week.

The frequency of students’ interacting online can be considered low, nevertheless with the average interaction recorded, it proved that the students did have commitment to log into i-discussion at least once a week. This means the students did not take advantage of online learning by not at all making a ‘presence’. This is an interesting finding for a language class since students were having interaction although in a different mode because the reality in face-to-face class is that most of the time students keep quiet and do not speak at all unless asked.

4.3. Frequency of Students’ Participation in Online Discussion

In completing the task, students were also required to do readings. In i-discussion, the lecturers posted notes and reading materials, asked and answered questions and queries, gave suggestions, edited students’ writing and provided exercises. On the students’ part, they needed to respond not only to their lecturers but also group-mates by asking and answering questions, giving suggestions, editing peers’ writing, responding to reading materials and exercises posted. The post in i-discussion showed that students did what were required of them. They took the chance to ask questions and making queries, give comments to their lecturers’ and friends’ posts, respond to reading materials and do exercises. Many of them use the
facilities provided such as the drawers to upload their written work and exercises. There were also students who provided link in their answers that enable fellow friends to have additional readings and references. Although the number is small, it shows that the students did show engagement in their learning. The most interesting finding is the students’ willingness to share their views and opinions as well as their written work with all their group mates online. This is something that rarely happens in a face-to-face class as students cite shyness as a reason for not doing so.

To sum up, engagement does take place in this mode of learning as this reflects the results of Raihan’s (2010). Raihan (2010) and Akkoyunlu and Yimoz Soylu (2006) also stated that the more students engage in blended learning, the more positive their perceptions are towards the mode.

4.4. Students’ Performance in Blended Learning Environment

To further understand the impact of blended learning on students, the students’ performance is also analysed to seek if there is any significant difference between the performances of students in blended learning group and the students in face-to-face group. Three subcategories below were observed.

4.4.1. Students’ performance in Writing Task

There is a statistically significant difference in the performance in the writing task between the group that did blended learning and the group that did not. The face-to-face group did better than the group that did with a mean difference of 1.4438.

4.4.2. Students’ performance in the Writing Component in the Final Examination

The difference between the performances in the writing component in the final exam between the blended learning group and the face-to-face group is considered to be not statistically significant with the blended learning group to be slightly better with a mean difference of 0.204.

4.4.3. Students’ performance in overall grade of EAP course

There is no significant difference in the overall grades between the group that did blended learning and the group that did not. However, the blended learning group noted slightly higher mark with a mean difference of 1.1009.

To conclude, except for the writing task, there are no significant differences in the performances of students between the two groups in the writing component and the final grade. Although there is a significant difference in the performances in the writing task with face-to-face group performing better, the mean difference is very small. This findings support those of Barry and Runyan (1995), Gagne and Shepherd (2001) and Schulman and Sims (1995). Moreover, Lim et al (2009) also conclude that instructional delivery format may not affect learners’ learning or application of learning to a significant degree.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this paper can be summarized as follows:

- The students’ perception towards blended learning is positive.
- The students’ engagement in the aspect of frequency of online interaction is low.
- The students’ engagement in the aspect of online interaction content shows signs of high commitment.
The students’ performance via blended learning has no significant difference from that of face-to-face learning.

In blended learning, perception and engagement have a concordant relationship (Raihan, 2010 and Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz Soylu, 2006). Blended learning environment is indeed the best combination of both learning situations. Information as well as communication technology environment is best suited to provide a meaningful and authentic experience for students in the learning process. The two major components of engagement that rose from this study are the online environment and the face-to-face environment activities. These engagement and interaction helped the students in completing their writing task. Moreover, the intervention of the blended learning helped the students in completing the writing task and final examination as successfully as their face-to-face counterparts.

Blended learning environment indeed provides the students with the best of both worlds. To conclude, this study proposes that blended learning be introduced widely in universities provided that both lecturers and students are given enough training and knowledge on how to use the LMS. Although there is no significant difference in the achievements of the students in the modes, undeniably online learning mode in blended learning does help in economizing teaching resources, promoting learner centeredness and offering better learner-instructor communication (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

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