

Virtual Learning, Blended Learning and Modern Foreign Languages: Let's listen to the students!

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Abstract

The Open Language Programme (OLP) at London Metropolitan University is an Institution-Wide Language Programme which offers credit-bearing modules to undergraduates and post-graduates of all subjects, staff from the university, as well as members of the general public. The programme is available in eight languages (General and Business English, Arabic, French, Italian, Japanese, German, Mandarin Chinese and Spanish) at up to ten different levels. All modules are based on a blended learning formula, a package of face-to-face group tuition and self-study. Since October 2008, all OLP students have had access to Weblearn, our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which provides essential course information, together with specially-tailored blended learning materials. A study was conducted among students of Japanese for beginners and post-beginners in spring 2009 and sought to evaluate their experience of Weblearn in the context of blended learning, using largely their own reported accounts and a mixed method approach to research. This paper presents initial findings, with a particular focus on collaborative learning.

Keywords: VLE, blended learning, collaborative learning, students' experience

1 Background of the study

The precarious situation of Modern Foreign Languages in the United Kingdom, with issues such as the decreasing number of students on specialist language degree courses and the closure of university departments, is reported by numerous organisations such as the National Centre for Languages (CILT) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

CILT with support from the Association for Language Learning and the Independent Schools' Modern Language Association conducted a survey based on a questionnaire sent to a representative sample of 2,000 schools in England, with a response rate of 43%. The survey has been carried out annually since 2002 to track developments in language provision and take-up in secondary schools. The 2008 survey indicates that

The declines of the past few years have been halted, although not yet reversed, but the picture is one of turbulence rather than stability. There are signs of shifts and upheavals, both positive and negative, as schools adjust to having to "make the case" for languages to students. (CILT, 2008)

Regarding Higher Education, the CILT analysis (2008) of HESA data, based on annual enrolment figures, reveals a decline of 5.3% overall on first degree language students in Higher Education between 2002-2003 and 2006-2007. In contrast, enrolments for first degrees increased by 29.9% for Japanese. Enrolments on Japanese language modules as part of non-language specific degrees increased by 37.8% between 2002-2003 and 2006-2007. Kelly (2008) explains that

languages remain vulnerable, despite being strategically important for the future of the country. But there are signs that government initiatives and the efforts of language educators are beginning to have an effect, at least in slowing the decline.

In this context, various initiatives have been launched at national level. For example, the DFES National Languages Strategy (2002) has implications at all stages of the education system and extends beyond the classroom, including at international level

In the knowledge society of the 21st century, language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extras, they are an essential part of being a citizen. (Ashton 2002)

HEFCE has agreed to fund *Routes into Languages* to encourage the take-up of language courses in England. The programme, led by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS), in a partnership with the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and CILT, is scheduled to run until 2009/2010.

The study is firmly anchored in a context of promotion of e-learning and evaluation of the student experience at governmental and institutional levels. Following the publication in March 2005 of the HEFCE ten-year e-learning strategy, the Higher Education Academy was invited to lead a benchmarking exercise and related Pathfinder programme in partnership with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). The benchmarking exercise was intended to help institutions establish where they were in regard to embedding e-learning. The Pathfinder programme, by contrast, was specifically designed to help selected institutions, on behalf of the sector, identify, implement and evaluate different approaches to the embedding of technology-enhanced learning in ways that result in positive institutional change. In a context of widening participation within Higher Education Institutions, coupled with budgetary constraints, e-learning is frequently presented in educational circles as of clear benefit, at governmental level, at institutional level and at student level. Indeed, Hurd (2002) comments

Increasing diversity in the student population, through widening participation, new technologies and new, more cost-efficient practices in course production are forcing a re-think of current activity and providing a challenge to all those involved in the design and delivery of learning constantly seek out ways of ensuring that the needs of our language learners are met.

At London Metropolitan University, OLP students are presented with a blended learning package of three hours per week of face-to-face group tuition over twelve weeks, supplemented with specially-tailored e-learning materials (online packs) available on Weblearn, the university's VLE, together with other course documentation.

The study seeks to evaluate students' experience of Weblearn among students of Japanese, with a particular focus on the transition from beginners to post-beginners, in the context of blended learning, using largely students' own reported accounts and a mixed method approach to research, heavily based on theories of collaborative learning.

2 Key concepts in context

Learning is linked intrinsically to life and happens both consciously and unconsciously, in formal and informal settings. It varies according to the individuals, their intended outcome, is influenced by factors both internal and external to the learners and fluctuates over time. Here, learning focuses on students' interaction with technologies, in a semi-formal setting and draws on self-study skills, language learning skills, computer skills and use of technologies.

All OLP students are presented with a blended learning package of 3 hours of lessons per week over 12 weeks, supplemented with self-study materials based on Weblearn. MacDonald (2006:2) defines blended learning as 'associated with the introduction of online media into a course or programme whilst recognising merit in retaining face-to-face contact.' Here, I will define blended learning more precisely as the combination of face-to-face scheduled lessons taking place at the university, supplemented by tailored e-learning activities based on the VLE.

In addition, I take the view that collaborative learning is essential to students' progress. I will define collaborative learning as the possibility for the learners to learn from one another, and for the learners to learn from the tutor using communication tools available on the VLE (which includes training of students by tutors in the use of VLEs). In agreement with socio-constructivist models of learning, I believe that the human factor plays a major part in the students' learning experience. Beale (2004) highlights the importance of communication tools and collaborative learning as forms of support to maximise students' learning

'For many people, what is required is the digital equivalent of the street corner-where people can come and go; requiring little knowledge to participate in; and where people can learn and gain support and advice from their colleagues.'

For Naismith et al (2006), the potential of learning technologies can only be considered either embedded in classroom practice or as part of a learning experience outside the classroom. In addition, they recognise their capabilities for social interactions and foresee that

Learning will move more and more outside of the classroom and into the learner's environments, both real and virtual, thus becoming more situated, personal, collaborative and lifelong. (Naismith et al 2006)

3 Methodology

The objective was to collect data on students' lived experiences and to identify the meanings behind their reported behaviours and attitudes. Therefore, I followed a

perspective based on hermeneutical phenomenology, which focuses on interpretive structures of experience, how we understand and engage in our human world.

Phenomenological research, in which the researcher identifies the 'essence' of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method. (Creswell 2003)

This was reinforced by a combined positivist and interpretative approach, coupled with a qualitative and quantitative treatment of data, using student self-completion questionnaires, learning diaries and the tracking function on the VLE.

Positivism is an approach to social research which seeks to apply the natural science model of research to investigations of the social world. It is based on the assumption that there are patterns and regularities, causes, and consequences in the social world, just as there are in the natural world. (Denscombe 2003)

In line with a positivist framework, quantitative data was obtained from the closed questions included in the questionnaire and the tracking function. Open questions related to students' experience of Weblearn and data from the learning diaries lent themselves to a qualitative treatment, in agreement with an interpretative approach.

The sample population included 34 students, 21 beginners and 13 post-beginners, studying Japanese on the OLP in spring semester 2009, with significant proportions of part-time and external students (members of the general public enrolled on OLP modules). Most post-beginners had previous experience of Weblearn. Overall, 67% of participants completed the self-study component of their Japanese module from home, away from their peers, tutors and university facilities.

4 Experience of Weblearn

Approximately 50% of participants thought Weblearn contributed to their progress. 27% of beginners were satisfied or very satisfied with the provision and 36% thought 'it was ok'. Figures reached 60% and 25% respectively, among post-beginners.

Participants admitted to spend only a limited amount of time on Weblearn, less than one hour per week for 52% of beginners and 77% of post-beginners. Reasons for the limited use of Weblearn deserve further investigation and may include personal or professional commitments, the possibility to use the online packs without logging to Weblearn, negative views towards the VLE, lack of integration of Weblearn into the taught component or simply different learning preferences.

Weblearn contains Japanese learning materials and course documentation, such as module handbooks, weekly course syllabi and details of assessment. Both beginners (76%) and post-beginners (92%) declared referring to the module handbook. Regarding the weekly syllabi, figures reached 39% and 60% respectively. Online announcements appeared to be neglected by students, as beginners (52%) and post-beginners (46%) only read them 'once in a while'.

5 Experience of the online packs

Online packs are specially-tailored e-learning materials which students should use for self-study and homework, once they have attended their weekly class. They contain a variety of exercises with answers included (listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, practice of the Japanese script) and additional web links. Online packs are available as a link on Weblearn and students access them as web pages with usernames and passwords.

65% of beginners (against 27% of post-beginners) declared being satisfied or very satisfied with the online packs. The study focused on specific aspects of these materials such as their user-friendliness, visual aspect, choice of topics and variety. In all these areas, the proportion of students who were satisfied or very satisfied declined as they progressed to post-beginners' level. 72% of beginners (against 55% of post-beginners) thought the online packs were user-friendly or very user-friendly. 50% of beginners and 20% of post-beginners were happy or very happy with the presentation of the online packs. For the choice of topics, figures go down from 67% to 38% and finally there is a decline from 56% to 45% regarding the variety of tasks.

Few students (15% of beginners and 20% of post-beginners) submitted to their tutors written tasks included in the online packs. In addition, 50% of beginners and 70% of post-beginners were rarely or never taking notes as part of their 'homework'. Students as a whole preferred to use their own lecture notes and set coursebook, as a source of help. Beginners also referred to other coursebooks while post-beginners started showing an interest in dictionaries. Students' preferences for the use of the set coursebook and own lecture notes may be explained by the fact that classes are scheduled in the evenings only and most students (67%) admittedly complete their Weblearn work off-site, as opposed to using the university's self-access facility (Language Centre).

6 Interpretation

Decisions were made at institutional and departmental levels to use a VLE. Indeed, London Metropolitan University has launched a blended learning strategy through Weblearn. Both teaching staff and students have received some introductory training in this area. Participants have expressed the following views regarding Weblearn

*Weblearn is excellent and gives very good opportunities for extra practice
Exercises on weblearn are very useful; I like the section on Manga
Weblearn contains all the material needed to help language learners
Weblearn is very useful to improve my Japanese. It has everything I want to learn, is
fun and interesting Weblearn is very interesting and fun. It makes me enjoy the course.
Everything we learn is shown on weblearn*

However, figures regarding the frequency of use, the submission of written tasks and the consultation of online announcements show a fairly limited use of Weblearn. Bearing in mind constraints faced by both staff and students, data indicates some possible reasons for these findings such a perceived lack of connection between taught contents and the self-study component by the students, coupled with tutors' choice to distribute additional

materials which follow more closely actual lesson contents. Indeed, 5 students would have liked Weblearn to match up more closely with lessons and another 2 students were satisfied with handouts only. In addition, 9 students stated a preference for using alternative materials such as books they purchased themselves (in addition to their set coursebook) or other printed materials of their choice.

As part of the qualitative treatment of data, 6 students reported technical difficulties such as the inability to login, dead links in the online packs and problems to download materials or display the Japanese script properly. Another 6 students commented on the difficulty to navigate and find materials.

Finally, quantitative data on students' experience of the online packs indicates that updating the materials may be beneficial in various areas, as indicated in an earlier section.

Students appeared to respond more positively to web links available on Weblearn. In this area, beginners had a preference for the links towards the online packs (26%), flashcards (15%), and sites such as Kids Web Japan (14%), as well as Hiragana charts and Web Japan Culture (12%). Post-beginners used the Hiragana charts (23%) and online packs, flashcards and Web Japan were of equal interest (17%). Here again, figures seem to indicate a shift away from the online packs towards a greater variety of web-based materials.

7 Recommendations

Beginners (85%) and post-beginners (54%) would like to use online packs in pdf and mp3 format, which would resolve difficulties related to the display of the Japanese characters.

Participants would generally welcome additional materials to download from Weblearn (such as helpsheets with key vocabulary and grammar, or Hiragana/Katakana tables and practice sheets). In this study, figures ranged from 14 to 16% among beginners for each of the extra materials listed above; and 12 to 17% among post-beginners. Communication tools only attracted 5% of the cohort. These issues would benefit from further investigation, as they have implications regarding material development, collaborative learning and both staff and student training.

Regular updates, following students' feedback, is likely to assist in maintaining students' motivation and satisfaction. Indeed, students who are active participants of their own learning, in terms of what, when and how they learn, are more likely to keep motivated. The Flexi-pack project launched at SOAS-UCL CETL Languages of the Wider World is of particular interest here (Ticheler & Sachdev 2008).

Ideally, authors of materials, including updates, should be tutors with current or previous experience of the modules, to ensure a greater compatibility of materials with taught sessions. Principles of teacher empowerment and theories of collaborative learning indicate that a greater involvement of tutors at the production stage is likely to boost the normalisation of materials among students.

Indeed, I would suggest taking direct action to foster a greater normalisation of the VLE among teaching staff and students, both in and out of the lessons. I take the view

that teaching staff need to guide and motivate students to make regular use of the Weblearn provision presented to them by giving them a demo early in the course, together with regular learning tips in class and adding materials and information to be consulted both in and out of class. In short, the key is to embed e-learning in regular learning and teaching activities, to seek feedback from stakeholders at regular intervals and to ensure flexibility of the provision, in hand with careful training.

8 Conclusion

This study focused on students' experience of Weblearn in connection with their Japanese module on the OLP at London Metropolitan University. A mixed method research strategy combining a qualitative and quantitative treatment of data pointed out difficulties in areas such as e-learning design and learning preferences and a case was made for the benefits of collaborative learning. In particular, the normalisation of Weblearn is of significant importance for blended learning to succeed. Another necessity is to integrate regular feedback from staff and students to practice-based research projects.

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