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著者	Shaun HOGGARD
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A Comparison of Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Online Learning

Shaun HOGGARD*

Abstract : This research investigated how both students and teachers perceived online learning during its enforced adoption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven teachers and 48 students were surveyed in the summer of 2020. The survey focused on the issues of convenience, fatigue, learning, and support. Results indicated that both groups preferred traditional face-to-face classes and believed that less learning than usual took place during this period. The groups diverged in their perceptions of convenience, fatigue, and support. Among the conclusions reached was the realization that much greater levels of support will be needed to effectively incorporate online learning into teaching methodologies.

Key words : online learning, COVID-19, student perceptions, teacher perceptions

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created a situation in which educational activities around the world were forced to move online. In many cases these moves were preceded by little time for preparation and a knowledge gap on behalf of both teachers and students regarding how best to utilize the available technology. This small-scale study sought to gauge the perceptions of online learning created during this unprecedented time, and to shed light on any divergences that may exist between educators and learners.

Although this study did not focus on language learning specifically, the students and educators surveyed were all involved in language related courses. Online language learning has developed as a natural progression from computer-assisted language learning (CALL). There has been a long history of research within the CALL field (see Hegelheimer, Li, & Dursun, 2018), and a wide range of studies conducted in the more recent area of mobile-assisted language learning (see Crompton & Burke, 2018). While some of these studies have focused on structured learning (e.g. Evans, 2014), others have looked at the incidental learning that can occur during unstructured use of the internet and

online gaming (e.g. Reinders & Wattana, 2015). Research into student attitudes regarding the structured use of CALL and online resources has produced generally positive results (Ayres, 2002; Afshari et al, 2013). However, these studies also show that learners are resistant to computerised or online learning completely replacing traditional face-to-face educational practices.

This study, therefore, asked the question of how students and educators reacted to a sudden, unplanned and ad hoc move to a completely computer and mobile based learning environment. I begin by examining the data retrieved by an online survey given to 48 students taking an English academic writing course. In particular I focus on the learners' perceptions of the convenience, amount of learning, degree of fatigue, and levels of support they experienced during this period. I then compare that data to the perceptions offered up by a group of seven educators teaching courses at the same time. Limited access to students and other educators during the pandemic severely restricted the number of students and educators who could be surveyed, and unfortunately reduces the strength of any conclusions that can be reached. However, this study should at least offer some insight and a starting point for further investigations into the issues that can arise during periods of enforced online learning.

* Center for Education in Liberal Arts and Sciences

Results and Discussion

In addition to the results from the survey shown below in Table 1, the learners were asked if they preferred online learning, regular classes, or a combination of the two. Only 18 per cent of the respondents answered that they preferred online learning. Of the remaining students 44 per cent said that they preferred traditional face-to-face classes, and 37 per cent favored a mixture of the two kinds. These results were echoed in the responses from the teachers, none of who expressed a preference for online classes.

When asked to elaborate upon the negative aspects of online learning the students mentioned the lack of peer-interaction it affords, in addition to several technical issues that compromised the quality of the classes. The teachers also cited technical problems, furthermore they noted the difficulties they had with classroom management due to not being able to monitor the whole class simultaneously.

The high number of technical malfunctions that occurred during this period of online learning can, at least in part, be attributed to the limited preparation time and training both students and teachers received before the commencement of classes. A lack of opportunities for peer-interaction and classroom management difficulties are, however, a much more intractable set of problems that need to be addressed before online learning can be adopted more successfully.

The results displayed in Table 1 below showed that, on the whole, they found online learning more convenient than regular campus-based learning. Looking at the comments made by the students, the main reasons they put forward for this were the ability to study from home and not being required to spend time travelling to and from university every day.

The teachers, on the other hand, generally found online teaching to be less convenient than regular classes. Two main reasons were put forward for this. The first reason was that some institutions required the teachers to perform their online classes from on campus. This had the effect of eliminating the convenience of being able to work from home

experienced by the students. Conversely, teachers who were able to work from home experienced difficulties delineating between their work and home life.

Technologically supported online learning can clearly offer increased convenience in the ability it affords to span distance with remote classes, or time with on-demand lessons. However, when institutional and social factors are included the level of convenience, especially for educators, can be severely diminished.

Results concerning how fatiguing the students found online classes were much more mixed. Nearly half of them considered them to be less tiring, however, nearly 30 per cent found them to be more fatiguing than regular classes. The students again tended to focus on the fact that studying from home negated the need to travel to university. Among those who found studying online more tiring than regular classes, the most common complaint was that their eyes became tired from too much screen time.

Of the teachers who took part in this survey, over two thirds found teaching online to be more tiring than teaching face-to-face. Many of them noted the deleterious physical effects brought on from spending hours teaching via computer. These effects were mainly manifested in the form of neck or back pain. They also mentioned the extra work that went into planning and administrating the lessons, particularly keeping attendance.

It can be seen from these results that fatigue is a real concern when evaluating online learning. For educators in particular, the physical toll caused by an increase in static, computer-based work is one that needs to be mitigated. However, as this study was conducted during an exceptional period, it is likely that as students and teachers become used to online learning the fatiguing aspects would become more manageable.

Over half of the students who participated in this survey believed that they learned less than usual from online learning than they did from face-to-face classes. Only 11 per

Table 1: *Student Perception of Online Learning (%)*

Online Learning	Much less than usual	Less than usual	Same as usual	More than usual	Much more than usual
Convenience	7.4	18.5	18.5	48.1	7.4
Fatigue	14.8	33.3	22.2	25.9	3.7
Learning	3.7	51.9	33.3	11.1	0
Teacher support	0	29.6	48.1	11.1	11.1
Staff support	11.5	38.5	42.3	7.7	0
Peer support	23.1	42.3	34.6	0	0

cent thought that they learned more. In some cases the students had difficulties in communicating with their classmates and teachers, and therefore could not receive adequate feedback or clarification of points of concern. In other cases the students believed that online learning was demotivating and that impacted upon their learning.

None of the teachers believed that their students learned more than usual during this period. Similarly to the students, over half of them thought that they learned less. The reasons given for the lower levels of learning included the lack of peer-support received by the students, and the absence of visual cues leading to difficulties in judging the level of comprehension achieved in the teaching groups.

As the primary goal of education is to effect learning in the students, it is clearly a grave concern that both teachers and students believed that the amount of learning produced during this period was less than would be expected under normal circumstances. Attempts must therefore be made to improve the efficacy of online practices.

The final aspect of online learning that was surveyed in this study was the issue of support, from teachers, administrative staff, and peers. Nearly half of the students suggested that the support from their teachers did not differ from regular periods of lessons. Almost 30 per cent believed they received less support while over 20 per cent answered that they received more or much more support than usual. Support from administrative staff was gauged as being less than usual by half of the students. The most striking result was that nearly two-thirds of the students said they received less support from their peers than usual, and none said they received more. One of the major complaints made by the students was that some teachers compensated for an absence of face-to-face contact by overburdening the students with homework assignments. This was compounded by a lack of feedback, which led to some students not being able to adequately gauge their own progress.

The majority of the teachers thought that they offered more support to their students during this period than during a regular term. In general this support was offered in the form of email exchanges. Therefore it is likely that while the teachers spent more time than usual giving support, as it was primarily on a one-to-one basis there were many students who received very little support at all.

Distance learning by its nature usually entails a lack of physical proximity between those involved. This is especially burdensome for administrative staff who do not

have the benefit of regularly scheduled classes as an avenue to contact the students. Education is fundamentally a collaborative endeavour; therefore it is important that greater feedback and more open channels of communication are instigated to ensure adequate support for online learners.

Conclusion

If more learning is to move online, either due to situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic or through a desire to incorporate emerging technologies into educational practices, it is vital that efforts are made to understand the different set of issues that arise in comparison to traditional face-to-face teaching. Some of the major limitations of online learning that emerged during this study were technical issues, an excessive reliance on report writing in lieu of in-class work, and a lack of administrative and peer support. Of these the first two are likely to diminish as educators become used to the available technology and gain a better understanding of a suitable workload for the students to complete. The final issue will require a much more holistic approach to online education that includes out-of-class activities, such as study groups and social events.

Moving forward, students and teachers alike will be required to embrace the technology available and attempt to use it to fulfil as many of the educational needs of the learners as possible. However, it seems unlikely that any combination of the currently available technologies will be able to replace the whole range of experiences provided by on-campus interactions.

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