Five Institutional Reasons Adult Distance Learners Find it Difficult to Learn the English Language via Distance Education

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Abstract

Adult distance learners face many difficulties in learning the English language via distance education. This article analyses the institutional reasons which bring about these difficulties that were identified through a qualitative survey based on the essay written by 1042 students of the JUE 200 English course conducted at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Current literature on the same issue is also reviewed. The article presents 5 institutional reasons for lecturers, university administrators and institutions to consider as part of their own strategic plan to mitigate learners' concerns and to ensure the success of the English language program. The five reasons discussed include the following: (1) Interaction; (2) English Language Course; (3) Course lecturer; (4) Learning module and (5) E-learning portal, audio and visual. Suggestions from JUE 200 learners to improve the English language course are also reported in this article.

Keyword: distance learner, institutional reason, difficulty

Abstrak

Pelajar pendidikan jarak jauh menghadapi pelbagai masalah mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris. Artikel ini menganalisa sebab institusi dengan menggunakan kaedah soal selidik kualitatif ke atas karangan 1,042 pelajar yang mengambil kursus JUE 200 yang ditawarkan di Pusat Pengajian Pendidikan Jarak Jauh, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Sastera terkini tentang perkara yang sama dikaji. Artikel ini memberi lima sebab institusi kepada pensyarah, pentadbir universiti dan institusi untuk pertimbangan sebagai sebahagian pelan strategi bagi mengurangkan keperluan pelajar dalam memastikan kejayaan kursus bahasa Inggeris. Lima sebab yang dibincangkan adalah 1. Interaksi 2. Kursus Bahasa Inggeris 3. Pensyarah kursus 4. Modul pembelajaran dan 5. Portal E-pembelajaran, pendengaran dan penglihatan. Cadangan

oleh pelajar JUE 200 untuk memperbaiki kursus bahasa Inggeris dilaporkan dalam artikel ini.

Kata kunci: pelajar pendidikan jarak jauh, Bahasa Inggeris, sebab institusi, kesulitan

Introduction

English language learning difficulties via distance education have always been an issue for adult distance learners (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006; White, 2003). White (2003) stated that in a distance education context for language learning, learners face new demands placed on them in comparison to face-to-face learners in the traditional classroom. Distance learners have to get used to this isolated context with reduced interactions with both the lecturer and other language learners. Also, the lecturer concerned is not always physically present with the learner to provide assistance as well as feedback regarding the development of the learner's language skills.

Despite the difficulties, there is still visible growing demand for distance education due to three factors, a belief in the accessibility and convenience of online technologies, the need to be in front line of progress, and a perception that distance education is time- and cost-effective to every party – the institution, the teachers and the students (White, 2003). Hence, the quality of the English language courses need to be revised constantly to ensure the sustainability of the distance education programmed at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) based on the learners' needs and concerns.

This study intended to assess the experiences of distance learners and addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the institutional reasons causing difficulties for distance learners to learn English at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia?

2. What are the distance learners' suggestions to overcome these difficulties?

This was carried out by documenting the learners' views about the institutional reasons making it difficult for them to learn the English language via distance education. The students were asked to present their views through a written essay. This gave the researchers access to the learners' voices (Baily & Nunan, 1996) in order to obtain a fuller understanding about the obstacles that the learners face. This article presents the findings and suggests practices to ameliorate the difficulties.

Distance Education in Malaysia

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has been the pioneer in Distance Education (DE) since 1971. Distance education provides higher education opportunities for working adults in Malaysia. USM has evolved from the first generation of distance education (Boyle, 1995; White, 2003), the print-based model; to the second generation, the combination of print with broadcast media and cassettes and is coming into the third generation which utilises information and communication technology as its basis. Mahmud et al. (2008) pointed out that educators should emphasise meeting the learning needs of the students when planning for technological integration in a particular lesson. A home grown electronic portal http://el.usm.my was launched in December 2003 to enable electronic support for administrative and learning activities for the School of Distance Education, USM (Idrus, 2007).

Currently, there are 4 undergraduate courses offered by the School of Distance Education which include Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Social Science and Bachelor of Management. Students need to spend a minimum of 4 years to complete their study. To date, USM has established 12 Regional Centres that are situated in major towns in each state of Malaysia to enable easy access for the students and to facilitate the teaching and learning process. During the semester break at USM, distance learners come to the USM main campus for a three week intensive course and final exam. During this intensive course, learners will have the opportunity to meet their respective course lecturers and course-mates.

JUE 200 English Language Course

The JUE 200 English I Course is the second level of the English language proficiency course following the foundation course offered at School of Distance Education (SDE). It is an intermediate course focusing on the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing at an intermediate level. The course is open to students from all the undergraduate programmes offered at the SDE. In order to register for this course, a student is required to have obtained a Band 2 or Band 3 for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) or a 'C' for JUE 100 English Course for those who obtained a Band 1 for their MUET. It is a course which carries two credit units. Students are required to obtain at least a 'C' to pass the course. In total, students need four English credit units in order to graduate.

The students are provided with a module consisting of 10 units for their self-study. Five audio recorded lectures are placed in the e-learning portal of SDE for the students to refer to at their convenience. There are also two slots of face-to-face sessions during the intensive course. The students are assessed via coursework, continuous assessment and the final exam.

Methodology

The essay entries used in the present study were collected from JUE 200 English course assignment assigned by the course lecturer for undergraduates at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Students were asked to write an essay entitled "Aspects of the English language I find difficult to learn via Distance Education". In reviewing the essays, the researcher highlighted the institutional reasons for lecturers, university administrators and faculty as important indicators to be considered in strategic planning to improve the English language course.

Data Sampling and Data Analysis

The researchers employed convenience sampling as it includes the whole population of the JUE 200 English language learners so that it will inform the School of Distance Education of its current situation for future

reference. Convenience sampling is convenient and is the least costly in terms of time and money (Ferber, 1977; Marshall, 1996).

A total number of 1042 students of the JUE 200 English course conducted at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia participated in this research. For an in-depth understanding of the written essay, the researcher carefully analysed, categorised and thematised the emerging themes according to saliency, meaning and homogeneity (Patton, 1990). The researcher also conducted content analysis (Allison, 2002), by exploring and counting explicit mentions of the institutional reasons that were causing difficulties for distance learners to learn the English language. Bryman (2004) describes content analysis as "an approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner" (p. 275). Since the researchers sought to locate emerging themes as well, a more interpretative approach was used. From the themes emanating from the data, the researchers then obtained five reasons affecting distance learners' English language learning. Subsequently the mentioned themes were categorised accordingly.

Results

A total of 45.2% (471 students) of the JUE 200 English course students explicitly mentioned institutional reasons as causing their English language learning difficulties. Below are the five institutional reasons identified and the frequency of mention (numbers within the brackets) by the students:

1.   Interaction (343)
2.   Course (213)
3.   Course lecturer (95)
4.   Learning module (85)
5.   E-learning portal, audio and visual recording (56)

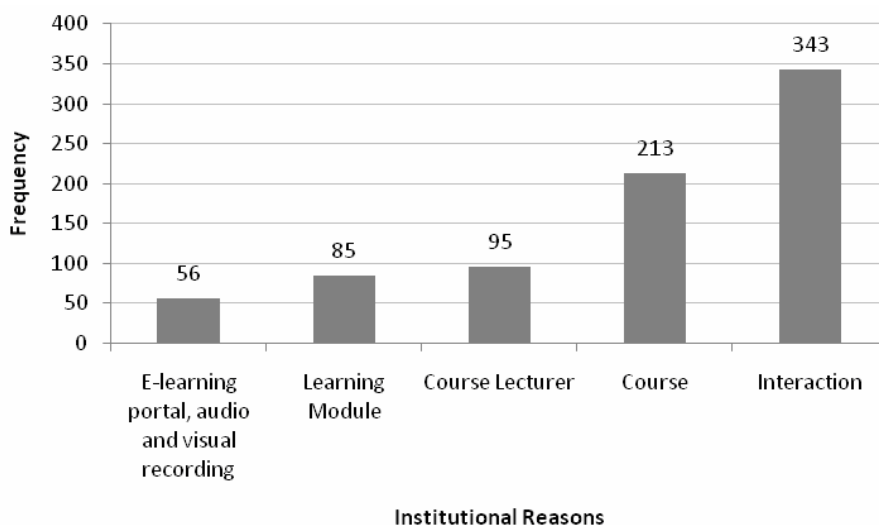The graph indicating the frequency of mention is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Frequency of mention of the five institutional reasons

Five Reasons

In this section, the five reasons are discussed in more detail. Excerpts of the students' comments are also presented in the original form without any editing done to achieve grammatical accuracy in order to preserve the authenticity of the students' accounts.

Interaction

The lack of interaction has proven to be the main institutional reason (343) learners find it difficult to learn English language via distance education. Interaction in the context of distance learning has traditionally been divided into the following three categories, as introduced by (Moore, 1989): (a) Interaction with content; (b) interaction with the instructor; and (c) interaction with the students. The interaction between the students and the course lecturer and between the students and their course-mates could include communication through devices such as email, chat-room, forums,

e-learning portal, short-message-service (sms) and telephone calls. Distance learners also find the lack of face to face interaction with the course lecturer and the course-mates in a classroom setting. Here are some of the distance learners' comments.

> *"The lack of communication between lecturers and me is one of the reasons why I cannot master the grammar aspects."*
> *"Lack of peer interactions and supports might also cause ineffectiveness in learning English via distance learning. "*
> *"When it comes to distance education, the opportunity to chat with someone especially the lecturer is not that much. This is due to lack of face-to-face communications."*
> *"At the USM portal, there's no live English chatting room for student to chat in English which is help to improve our English."*

English Language Course

The second frequently mentioned reason the learners (213) find it difficult to learn English via distance education is concerning the course. Four aspects of the course namely, class hours, class size and course schedule during the intensive course and the course focus were mentioned by the students.

The aspects of 'class hours' refers to the lecture hours conducted by the course lecturer. Currently, there are five lectures in the academic year of the study. The lectures are uploaded into the e-learning portal for distance learners to view at any time convenient to them. During the intensive course, there are two classes with a total of two hours of lecture. These are some of the students' comments illustrating how they feel about the inadequate lecture hours.

> *"During intensive course, English subject only two hours lesson. I find it difficult to learn English language in short time."*
> *"In distance learning, English subject always had a limited time in lecturing. Imagine in three weeks of intensive class only 2 to 4 hours we spend in learning English. I think this is not enough."*

The aspect of 'class size' was also mentioned by the students. The comment below is justified as there were 1042 students in the English

class during the intensive course. Undoubtedly, a large class size does not facilitate an effective English learning process.

> *"The communication is limited because there are so many students per session."*

Referring to 'course schedule', the distance learners had to juggle between attending course lectures and studying for continuous assessment with hardly any time to interact with their course-mates or lecturers regarding problems they faced and to seek guidance. These are excerpts of their comments.

> *"We cannot get to discuss with friends during this intensive course because the shortage of time. Thus, we also must be prepare for another subject."*
> *"There are simply too many new and unfamiliar words for me, so the intensive course is too short for me to learn English and I find that it is not much help."*

This leads to an exam-oriented learning environment. Learners also hope that the course lecturer would focus more on helping them to develop communication skills.

> *"When I further study through the distance learning program, I think I could have a chance to improve my speaking skills but the shortage of time and no oral exercise in intensive program can't make me to achieve that goals."*

Course Lecturer

Teachers play an important role in the success of distance education (Gibson et al., 2001; Lin et al., 2005), especially those in higher education (Croy, 1998; Haas & Senjo, 2004). Distance learners especially lack guidance from the course lecturer due to the distance education mode. In this study, another institutional reason mentioned by the learners was the course lecturer. This reason refers to meeting and obtaining feedback about the assignment from the course lecturer. Learners (95) find it difficult to meet the lecturer to ask for guidance, as indicated in the following excerpts:

> *"It is indeed hard for me to enhance my vocabulary through distance learning as the tutor is far away and will not be there to focus only on me."*

With regard to getting assignment feedback from the course lecturer, students experienced delayed feedback and even sometimes no feedback from the course lecturer.

> *"As a communication with my tutors is done by e-mail, I may not always get immediate answers to any queries I might have."*
> *"Immediate feedback does not happen in the online learning environment also."*
> *"It is really hard to me to learn English via distance education because I will not be inform what my mistake is and why the way I wrote is not correct."*

Learning Module

Learners (85) have also commented on the current learning material provided in the JUE 200 English course. This material was categorised into four aspects:

1. Insufficient learning material;
    These comments by the students document this aspect.

    > *"The materials provided through the e-learning portal are very limited. The materials provided are not enough to help the distance learners to master English."*
    > *"I also found that my interactive materials that allow me to listen effectively are insufficient for me as a distance education student to sharpen my listening skill."*

2. Lack of exercises;
    The following students' comments depict this lack of exercises.

    > *"In distance education, the listening tasks are quite rare to find and the learners are having problems to find for the listening tasks."*
    > *"While in distance learning, we often write messages on the forum but we are lack of exercise which can help improve our writing."*

3.   Inadequate provision of answers to exercises;
     This comment by a student illustrates that there was insufficient provision of feedback done on exercises attempted by the students.

> *"After finished the exercises, there are also no answer for the marking. I really do not know whether the grammar that I used is correct."*

4.   Lack of resources;
     This comment states inadequate resources and information as posing another problem for distance learners.

> *"Lack of the resources and information also other problems in the distance education."*

E-learning portal, audio and visual recording

USM provides the e-learning portal http://el.usm.my for distance learners to inform them about the latest administrative news. The course lecturer also uploads exercises, audio and visual recording of lectures and course material into the e-learning portal. From the analysis, the distance learners (56) commented on the quality and quantity of the course material and exercises. These comments are indicated in the following excerpts:

> *"Via distance education, the class is conducted online, sometimes due to some technical issue like signal lost, we miss some of the words or sentences and I find it difficult to catch what the lecturer is trying to say or explain during the interruption."*
> *"Interruptions might occur during live video conferring session, or maybe while downloading materials via the internet. Poor audio quality of recorded lectures is another problem."*
> *"Moreover, the textbook or even in portal only have a few of grammar exercise."*

Distance learners also find it difficult to interact with the JUE 200 course lecturer without the video conference session. These students shared their views in these comments:

"In English, student only got the planner academic and module. But in another subject we can get the same and video conference."

"It is because in our academic planning schedule, there was no video conference session in English language subject which made us difficult to interact with the lecturer about the subject."

Summary

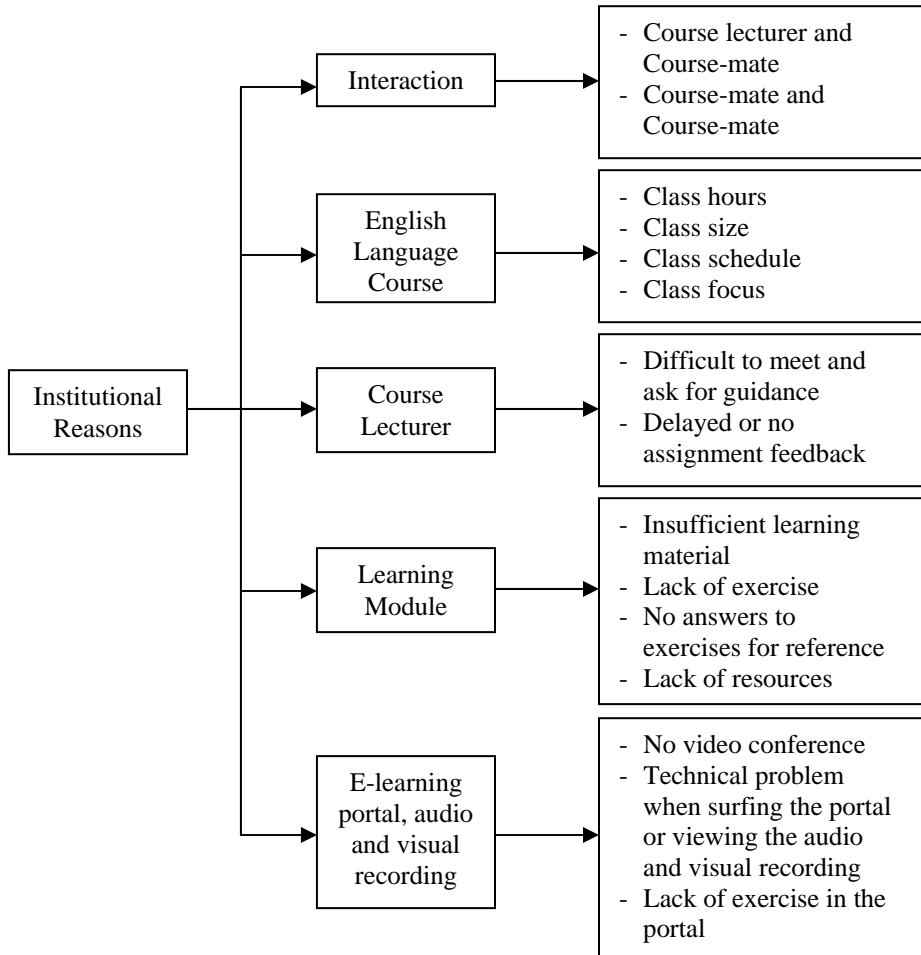The five institutional reasons are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2   The five institutional reasons

There were some students who felt that learning the English language through distance education is not an easy approach to help improve their command of English.

> *"I would like to conclude that through distance learning education to learn English language is not an easy task and there are a lot of things to cope with to make it real and meaningful."*

Suggestions for Improving the Course

From the total number of 1042 students, 51.44% (536) gave their suggestions in the hope that the English course can be improved for the benefit of distance learners. Their suggestions were categorised into four aspects based on the institutional reasons distance learners perceived as making it difficult for them to learn English.

Interaction

19.22% of the JUE 200 English course learners urged the institution to create more opportunities for interaction between students and the course lecturer.

> *"For my opinion classes should be conduct more frequently so that I'm able to communicate with my lecturer more often, face to face."*

Academic Support

Distance learners need strong academic guidance to enable them to learn better. They need encouragement to communicate with their lecturers.

> *"…Therefore, I think students should be encouraged to use the language more often in lecturers."*

Learners also stressed the need for the course lecturer or tutor to assist the weak learners especially at each regional centre.

> *"I really think that it would be great if we were given some time during our intensive that we could have a kind of tutorial or*

> *tuition as a chance to practice and discuss our assignment to strengthen our skills of speaking, listening, and writing."*
> *"Secondly lecturer must come to Region Centre for some exercises for us to do and not only for our meeting at intensive Course only on November every year but must giving it during the time."*
> *"I really need instructors to teach me face-to-face and regularly because there's lot of thing to learn and explanations to make in order to master this language very well."*
> *"I hereby suggest that we are given more guidance in form of interactive soft-wares where we can directly follow the lectures."*

Some students suggested having bilingual instructors to help explain the meaning of what they learn in English using the Malay language for better understanding.

> *"Other than that, lecturers must translate all the lesson in Malay language. It is easier for student to understand the sources that is given by the lecturers. The question must be given in two languages to enable students easy to answer easily."*

Course

The following are suggestions from 47.01% of the JUE 200 English course learners on improving the English course as a whole.

> *"I hope the matter be able to overcome by the lecturer to reactive portal English with providing exercise, writing exercise and others to students."*
> *"I suggest that more exercise should be given to the student regarding a grammar and writing. "*
> *"I suggest for distance learning, university should provide more classes which given student chance to interact with the lecturer and giving more note with example on English learner. "*

Distance learners also suggest that the institution provides more DVD/audio/visual material to help improve the learning of the English language.

> *"I think more audio slots should be uploaded into the e-portal so that student can improve listening skills."*
> *"Lastly for better English I hope Learning Distance can supplies media for better English maybe like CD's , book for simple English for simple use."*

Distance learners hope that the learning process via distance education could be more interesting and enjoyable.

> *"So the instructor and the students must work harder to create a good interactive environment especially to learn English language."*

They would like the teaching and learning of the English language to be evaluated to ensure more effectiveness.

> *"I would like to stress out on the distance learning provider itself to do research on how to make this knowledge transfer be easier, less complicated and most importantly attractive for students."*

Class Hour

A small number of students (40) suggest extending the lecture hour during the intensive course.

> *"I would suggest more often for practical are needed by the students which means to increase the numbers of lecturers."*
> *"The English lesson should be done frequently and prolong the allocated for the session."*

Class Size

The need for small scale classroom settings was also mentioned by the students (6).

> *"The distance education should make the English language classes into a small size which fewer students per class, individual attention is guaranteed."*

Focus

Distance learners (4) would like to develop their communication skills further.

> *"I suggest, the institution will teach their student not only focusing on grammar but the other factor that will make the students easy to understand this language."*

Portal

In view of the absence of video conferencing for the English language course for two way communication, distance learners (40) feel the importance of having a video conferencing.

> *"My suggestion, if we have a video conferencing is so much better. From that, we can speak to the lecturer."*

Implications and Limitations of the study

The main purpose of the study was to analyse the learners' institutional reasons which bring about language learning difficulties via distance education. The findings of this study depict a better understanding of learners' concerns and highlighted five institutional reasons for lecturers, university administrators and the institution to consider as part of their own strategic plan to mitigate learners' concerns and to ensure the success of the English language program.

There are a number of limitations in this study. Firstly, the students in the cohort were all at different stages of their studies, with some from the first year of study and others nearing their final year of study. Secondly, the varying levels of experience with the course may therefore, influence the institutional reasons mentioned by the individual students. Thirdly, since a person's institutional reasons for English language learning difficulties will also vary from individual to individual, it is hard to objectively qualify and quantify whether all learners' institutional reasons are being identified and reported.

Conclusion

The qualitative findings of this study has provided a glimpse into why the distance learners find it difficult to learn English. Through this study, we are also informed of the distance learners' suggestions on how to ease their English learning and mitigate their difficulties. It is indeed extremely challenging for the process of education to be implemented via a distance mode to fulfill learners' needs (Sampson, 2003).

What distance education administrators and educators hope for is a more urgent perception and understanding of what deters students from achieving an effective learning of English. Distance learners should not continue to feel isolated and that the teaching and learning of English can be improved to enhance a more beneficial learning outcome. In view of improving English language learning via distance education and to make it more accessible to distance learners, distance educators as well as authorities involved should take the learners' reasons and suggestions into account.

There is a need for an increase in student-lecturer interaction. Also, there has to be adequate access to feedback on students' exercises. Hence, there should be a smaller lecturer to student ratio. The learning process should be made more enjoyable and interactive by including more interactive materials and making them available to the students. The institution should also allow the lecturer to visit the students at the various regional centres from time to time to facilitate and ease the students' learning of English. This enables a face to face interaction context; as the students are more familiar with the traditional face to face classroom environment.

The researchers hope that this study will pave the way for broader attention to be given to the challenges met by these distance learners. Course lecturers, university administrators and institutions can effectively facilitate the transition of learners to the distance education mode by understanding learners' concerns.

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