

Effects of the Lecturer’s Transactional Presence towards Learners’ Intrinsic Motivation in Learning English as a Second Language through Distance Education

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Abstract

Learning English as a second language through distance education requires the learners to be highly motivated to learn and to carry out self-practice in order to improve and be competent users of the learned language. This article reports on the study undertaken to explore the relationship between distance learners’ perceptions towards the transactional presence of the course lecturer and their intrinsic motivation to learn English via distance education. A total of 512 students who enrolled in the JUE 300 English course responded to the quantitative questionnaire. The results indicated that a high level of transactional presence of the course lecturer is associated with a high level of intrinsic motivation in the distance learner. Based on the findings, this article concludes by making the following recommendations to providers, designers and instructors of English language learning courses in distance education: (1) be aware of the needs and expectations of distance learners in terms of the perceived transactional presence, i.e., the perceived availability and connectedness of the students to the lecturers and (2) enhance the students’ perception about the transactional presence of the lecturer. This can be achieved if the lecturer responds promptly to students’ emails and queries, participates actively in students’ blogs, chat rooms and discussions to increase learners’ intrinsic motivation to learn English via distance education.

Keywords: transactional presence, intrinsic motivation, English language via distance education

Introduction

Distance education is a system that provides learning opportunities to various groups of learners who have no access to the traditional, higher education institutions (Liu and Ginther, 1999). This opportunity of higher education has made it possible for working adults to strive beyond the traditional boundaries of educational transaction.

In Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has offered distance education since 1971, offering undergraduate degree programmes such as humanities, social sciences, sciences and management. The School of Distance Education (SDE), apart from providing students with a second chance for a higher education, stresses the use of English as a second language for academic purposes. In this light, the SDE students have to pass the English language courses offered at the SDE in order to graduate from their respective programmes (SDE Guidebook, 2010/2011). The students are required to enrol for these courses based on their English grades in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination or their grades in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

Characteristics of Distance Education

Distance learners face various challenges due to the nature of distance education. According to Keegan (1990), distance education has six major features: (1) the separation of teacher and learner, (2) the role of the educational organisation, (3) the place of the technological medium, (4) two-way communication, (5) the separation of learner and the learning group and (6) industrialisation. Distance education is an educational field that focuses on the particular pedagogy, andragogy, technology and instructional systems design that aims to deliver education to students who are not physically “on site”.

Fundamentally, the learner’s chances to meet face to face with lecturers and peers in a distance education setting are difficult and limited. Therefore, special techniques in course design, instructional materials design as well as methods of communication by electronic devices or other technologies are important (Moore and Kearsley, 1996).

One of the most common concerns regarding online and distance education is the physical separation between teachers and students (Robertson, Grant, and Jackson, 2005; Moore, 1997). Extensive research (Moore, 1973; 1991) has been conducted to investigate the factor of physical distance between students and teachers and among students in the distance education setting.

The Theoretical Framework

Although there have been studies into the effects of physical distance, there is still a lack of systematic research to investigate the factor of psychological distance in distance education. According to Moore (1973, 1991), psychological “distance” is a theoretical construct or a variable that can be manipulated by instructional design or a set of institutional arrangements. Shin (2003) stated that psychological distance is more important than physical distance. The learning process during the educational transaction might be influenced by the psychological distance perceived by learners towards their lecturers or instructors and peers.

The Transactional Presence

One of the most influential studies in psychological distance is that of transactional presence (TP) by Shin (2001; 2002). The construct of TP is derived from merging two areas of research, namely, those of media and communication studies and teaching-learning in distance transactions (Shin, 2003). Shin's concept of TP focused more on relationships (Munro, 1991) than interaction (Shin, 2003). TP is concerned with the degree to which a distance student perceives the availability of, and connectedness with, teachers, peer students and the institution. Meanwhile, interaction is viewed as the activity which may result in and from a high perception of TP. “Availability” refers to the notion that whatever is desired by a distance learner is obtainable upon his or her request. “Connectedness” refers to the distance learners' belief or feeling that there is a two-way relationship between the student and another party which could be the lecturer or other distance learners. It is conjectured that a distance learner who has a high TP can be assumed to feel less lonely (McWhirter, 1990) and may be able to manage his or her own needs and emotions better (Lee and Robbins, 1998). Shin (2003) further explicitly noted that TP is an important indicator for the success of learners of distance education where

learners who perceived higher TP may experience greater interaction with teachers, peer students and the institution.

Intrinsic Motivation

Researchers in social psychology and education have also recognised the importance of motivation for successful second language learning. Intrinsic motivation, which is central to initiative, may be regarded as an expression of autonomous regulation in development (Ryan, Kuhl and Deci, 1997). Intrinsic motivation is crucial to maintain one's interest to continue his/her learning of the English language through distance education. Students may be intrinsically motivated only for activities that they perceive as being personally interesting and enjoyable (Reeve et al., 2007).

Research has also shown that to succeed in online learning, learners must be able to motivate themselves, manage their time wisely, take responsibility for their own learning and participate in the give-and-take electronic discussions (Collett, 2000; Rovai, 2003; Smith, Murphy and Mahoney, 2003). Furthermore, the students must have initiative, be resourceful, demonstrate persistence and believe in their ability to organise and carry out the actions needed to engage in learning (Derrick, 2003).

The Research Question

In view of the above mentioned literature on the SDE distance learner's challenges in learning English via distance education *vis-a-vis* the importance of TP and intrinsic motivation, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the distance learner's perception of the TP of the lecturer at the SDE *vis-a-vis* his/her motivation to learn English via distance education. Specifically, the following research question was addressed in the study:

Is there a relationship between the distance learner's perception towards the TP of the course lecturer and the learner's intrinsic motivation to learn English language via distance education?

The null hypothesis of this study that corresponded to the research question was as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H01):

There is no relationship between the distance learner's perception towards the TP of the course lecturer and the learner's intrinsic motivation to learn the English language via distance education at the SDE.

Method

A cross-sectional survey design using questionnaires was deployed to collect data which reflected the learners' current perceived TP of the course lecturer and their intrinsic motivation in learning the English language via distance education.

The Research Sample

The population of this study consisted of 1,065 tertiary level distance learners who enrolled for the JUE 300 English course in the SDE for the 2009/2010 academic session. Students from this course were selected because they had at least one year's experience with the education system of the SDE and the university. According to Yamane (1967), with a population size of 1,000, the minimum sample size (n) should be at least 286 samples at a precision level where the confidence level is 95% with the *p*-value of 0.5. For this study, 512 distance learners returned the questionnaires. This was deemed sufficient based on Yamane's (1967) guidelines.

The Research Instrument

The questionnaire used in this research consisted of participants' personal details, an instrument adapted from Shin (2001) regarding TP and an inventory adapted from Ryan (1982) on intrinsic motivation (IM).

The TP instrument was used to measure the learner's perceived availability of, and connectedness with, their course lecturer and their course mates (Shin, 2002). The TP instrument consisted of 22 items where 9 items assessed the learner's self-initiative to interact with the course lecturer and 13 items assessed the lecturer's TP. The TP items had been adapted and modified to fit the learners' context without affecting their reliability or validity. For example, an item such as "I feel that my lecturer will encourage me to continue my studies" was modified to "I feel that my JUE lecturer will encourage me to continue my studies in the English

language course.” Validation was made for the modified items in this section. The items were in the form of a 5-point Likert scale (Table 1).

Table 1 The 5-point Likert scale

Scale rating	Description
1 point	Strongly disagree
2 points	Disagree
3 points	Neutral
4 points	Agree
5 points	Strongly agree

The internal consistency of the TP questionnaire for this study was estimated using the Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis (Cronbach, 1951). The results of the analysis showed that this instrument had good internal consistency, with a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.940.

The Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI)

The intrinsic motivation inventory (IMI) instrument is a multidimensional instrument designed by Ryan (1982). It consists of seven sub-scales to assess an individual’s intrinsic motivation and subjective experience related to a specific activity or learning task (McAuley, Duncan and Tammen, 1987). The IMI was designed specifically to assess an individual’s interest/enjoyment, perceived competence, effort/importance, pressure/tension, perceived choice, value/usefulness and relatedness while performing the given activity or learning task.

The inventory consists of 45 items that can be selected for use depending on which items are essential and necessary. The IMI items have often been modified to fit specific activities without affecting their reliability or validity. For example, an item such as “I enjoyed doing this activity very much” was modified to “I enjoyed learning the English language very much”.

In this study, 23 items were carefully selected and modified to construct the IMI specifically to measure the distance learners’ intrinsic motivation in learning the English language at the SDE. Validation was made for the modified items in this section. The items were in the form of a 7-point Likert scale (scale rating 1 representing “not at all true”, 4 representing “somewhat true” and 7 representing “very true”). Several items were

presented in the form of reverse questions. For statistical analysis purposes, scores for the reversed items were obtained by subtracting the item response from eight and using the resulting number as the actual item score.

The selected items for this study comprised four sub-scales:

1. **The interest/enjoyment** sub-scale that was considered as a self-report measure of intrinsic motivation (seven items).
2. **The perceived competence** concepts were theorised to be positive predictors of both self-report and behavioural measures of intrinsic motivation (six items).
3. **The effort/importance** sub-scale reflected the individual's effort towards the activity (five items).
4. **The value/usefulness** sub-scale was usually used in internalisation studies (five items).

(Deci et al., 1994)

The internal consistency of the IMI for this study was estimated using the Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis (Cronbach, 1951). The results of the analysis showed that the instrument used in the research had good internal consistency, with a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.917.

Reliability

Internal consistency reliability is a measurement about whether the single test is consistent among themselves as well as the whole test. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha approach which was generated by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to measure the reliability and suitability of questions in the questionnaire. The overall Cronbach's Alpha value for the three sets of questionnaires was 0.954. The Cronbach Alpha value for each section of the questionnaire was: 0.912 for the TP of the lecturer (TPLect), 0.928 for the TP of course mates (TPC), 0.830 for self-initiated interaction with the lecturer (SILect), 0.923 for self-initiated interaction with course mates (SIC) and 0.917 for learners' intrinsic motivation (Table 2). According to the table below, the Alpha value showed that the questionnaire was reliable (Table 3).

Table 2 Cronbach's reliability test results

Section in questionnaire	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha coefficient
TPLect	9	0.912
TPC	13	0.928
SILect	8	0.830
SIC	12	0.923
IM	23	0.917
Overall	65	0.954

Table 3 The reliability instrument and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Darren and Mallery, 2003)

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient	Description
Alpha > 0.9	Very good
Alpha > 0.8	Good
Alpha > 0.7	Accepted
Alpha > 0.6	Questionable and accepted
Alpha > 0.5	Weak and accepted
Alpha > 0.4	Not accepted

Validity of Research Instruments

The questionnaires were checked and validated by two senior lecturers from the SDE who are experts in the field of distance education. The purpose of validation was to ensure that the contents in the questionnaire were suitable for the target research sample and matched with the research objectives. According to Borg and Gall (1989), the validity of the contents of a questionnaire is the degree the items in the questionnaire are able to represent the purpose of the research.

Procedures

The questionnaires for this study were distributed to students on 3 December 2009 attending the first class of the JUE 300 English course scheduled during the intensive course at USM. The researcher gave the participants sufficient time to complete the questionnaires. They were requested to return the questionnaires by the end of the intensive course, in approximately three weeks. There was a constraint as learners were required to deal with lectures, laboratory work, assignments and continuous assessments during the three week period. These activities might have obstructed some participants from completing and handing in the questionnaires. Collection boxes were prepared and located at the main

office and in front of the course lecturer's office to make it convenient for the students to submit the questionnaires after office hours.

Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive and correlation statistics were performed using the SPSS for Windows Version 13.0 to analyse the collected data and to test the formulated hypotheses. The correlational analyses were mainly used in the inferential statistics of this study. Before performing correlational analyses, preliminary analyses were done to generate a scatterplot to check for violation of the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity (Pallant, 2004). Inspection of the scatterplots consisted of checking the outliers, inspecting the distribution of data points and determining the direction of the relationship between the variables.

Results

A total of 1,065 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents during the intensive course in December 2009. The total number of questionnaires collected was 514 which provided a 48% response rate.

The following descriptive statistics of the research sample describe the characteristics of the respondents. Table 6 tabulates the descriptive statistics of the research sample in terms of gender, age, academic year, ethnic group, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) score and course.

The descriptive statistics of the research sample showed that in terms of gender, 314 respondents (61.1%) of the total respondents ($N = 514$) were females while the other 200 respondents (38.9%) were males. The three main age groups were the age group of 36 to 40 years old ($n = 161$, 31.3%), followed by the age group of 31–35 years old ($n = 132$, 25.7%) and the age group of 26–30 years old ($n = 112$, 21.8%). The students were mainly from the third academic year ($n = 389$, 75.7%) at the SDE. Malay students made up the largest ethnic group ($n = 360$, 70%) in this study. Most of the respondents scored a Band 2 for the MUET ($n = 167$, 33.5%). Nearly 17% ($n = 83$) of the respondents had yet to take the MUET. About 77% ($n = 395$) of the respondents were from non-science courses.

Table 6 Descriptive statistics of the research sample

		Statistic	Percent
<i>N</i>	Valid	<i>N</i> = 514	100%
Gender	Male	<i>n</i> = 200	38.9%
	Female	<i>n</i> = 314	61.1%
	Valid	514	100%
Age	20–25 years	26	5.1%
	26–30 years	112	21.8%
	31–35 years	132	25.7%
	36–40 years	161	31.3%
	41–45 years	56	10.9%
	46–50 years	15	2.9%
	> 50 years	12	2.3%
	Valid	514	100%
	Missing	0	0
Academic Year	Year 1	1	0.2%
	Year 2	52	10.1%
	Year 3	389	75.7%
	Year 4	71	13.8%
	Others	1	0.2%
	Valid	514	100%
	Missing	0	0
Ethnic Group	Malay	360	70%
	Chinese	109	21.2%
	Indian	20	3.9%
	Others	25	4.9%
	Valid	514	100%
	Missing	0	0
MUET	Band 1	99	19.8%
	Band 2	167	33.5%
	Band 3	116	23.2%
	Band 4	31	6.2%
	Band 5	3	0.6%
	Yet to take MUET	83	16.6%
	Valid	499	100%
	Missing	15	2.9%
Course	Science	118	23%
	Non-Science	395	77%
	Valid	513	100%
	Missing	1	0.2%

Descriptive Statistics for Items Concerning the Transactional Presence Instrument

The Transactional Presence of Lecturer (TPLect)

The TPLect instrument consisted of nine items regarding the learners' perceived availability and perceived connectedness towards their course lecturer. Respondents were required to choose from the scale provided (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree). Table 7 describes the results of the item analysis for the questionnaire.

Table 7 Item analysis for lecturer's transactional presence

Item	Questions	N	mean	SD	Response values frequencies				
					1	2	3	4	5
1	I believe that if I ask my JUE lecturer to help me with my English language coursework, he/she will do so willingly.	512	4.07	0.777	1 (0.2)	14 (2.7)	89 (17.4)	251 (49.0)	157 (30.7)
2	I believe that there is a good relationship between my JUE lecturer and myself.	512	3.74	0.833	4 (0.8)	24 (4.7)	165 (32.2)	227 (44.3)	92 (18.0)
3	I believe that my JUE lecturer will give me advice if I ask him/her questions about the English language course.	513	4.14	0.770	1 (0.2)	12 (2.3)	79 (15.4)	244 (47.6)	177 (34.5)

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Table 7 (Continued)

Item	Questions	N	mean	SD	Response values frequencies				
					1	2	3	4	5
4	I feel that my JUE lecturer will encourage me to continue my studies in the English language course.	513	3.98	0.761	0 (0)	10 (1.9)	123 (24.0)	246 (48.0)	134 (26.1)
5	I believe that my JUE lecturer is willing to find time to meet me if I ask him/her to do so.	513	3.85	0.837	2 (0.4)	25 (4.9)	136 (26.5)	234 (45.6)	116 (22.6)
6	I feel that I know my JUE lecturer.	513	3.74	0.880	3 (0.6)	29 (5.7)	177 (34.5)	193 (37.6)	111 (21.6)
7	I feel comfortable when interacting with my JUE lecturer.	510	3.68	0.848	3 (0.6)	29 (5.7)	187 (36.7)	202 (39.6)	89 (17.5)
8	I feel a sense of belonging to PJJ along with my JUE lecturer.	509	3.58	0.801	3 (0.6)	22 (4.3)	233 (45.8)	181 (35.6)	70 (13.8)
9	The presence of my JUE lecturer is important as a motivation for me to learn the English language.	510	4.05	0.793	1 (0.2)	13 (2.5)	104 (20.4)	236 (46.3)	156 (30.6)

(N = number of respondents; SD = standard deviation; number in bracket = valid percentage)

By using the mean value of 1.00 to 1.49 to represent “strongly disagree”, 1.50 to 2.49 to represent “disagree”, 2.50 to 3.49 to represent “neutral”, 3.50 to 4.49 to represent “agree” and 4.50 to 5.00 to represent “strongly agree”; it can be seen that most of the respondents agreed with all the statements in the nine items where the range of the means was within 3.50 to 4.49 showing that they reported having a high TP with the lecturer.

Descriptive Statistics for Items Concerning the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory

The Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) consisted of four parts. Part A measured the learners' interest or enjoyment in learning English; Part B measured the learners' competence in learning English; Part C measured their effort or the importance of learning English for them while Part D measured the intrinsic values or usefulness/value of learning English. There were seven items, six items, five items and five items respectively in each of the sections. Respondents were required to choose from the scale of 1 to 7.

Table 8 describes the results of the item analysis for the questionnaire.

Table 8 Item analysis for the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory

Item	Questions	N	mean	SD	Response values frequencies						
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Section A: Interest/enjoyment											
E1	I enjoyed learning the English language very much	509	5.08	1.216	1 (0.2)	7 (1.4)	36 (7.1)	122 (24.0)	159 (31.2)	109 (21.4)	75 (14.7)
E2	Learning the English language is fun to do	509	4.93	1.222	2 (0.4)	9 (1.8)	41 (8.1)	141 (27.7)	153 (30.1)	103 (20.2)	60 (11.8)
E3	I thought learning the English language is a boring activity	507	2.68	1.509	148 (29.2)	107 (21.1)	104 (20.5)	84 (16.6)	41 (8.1)	16 (3.2)	7 (1.4)
E4	Learning the English language did not hold my attention at all	508	3.12	1.528	103 (20.3)	85 (16.7)	92 (18.1)	138 (27.2)	61 (12.2)	20 (3.9)	8 (1.6)

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Table 8 (*Continued*)

Item	Questions	N	mean	SD	Response values frequencies						
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E5	I would describe learning the English language as very interesting	505	4.90	1.254	1 (0.2)	10 (2.0)	50 (9.9)	140 (27.7)	142 (28.1)	99 (19.6)	63 (12.5)
E6	Learning the English language is quite enjoyable	505	4.90	1.264	4 (0.8)	11 (2.2)	48 (9.5)	126 (25.0)	154 (30.5)	106 (21.0)	56 (11.1)
E7	While I am learning the English language, I am thinking about how much I enjoyed it	505	4.75	1.267	6 (1.2)	11 (2.2)	60 (11.9)	137 (27.1)	143 (28.3)	108 (21.4)	40 (7.9)
Section B: Perceived competence											
E8	I think I am good in learning the English language	508	3.79	1.262	14 (2.8)	63 (12.4)	127 (25.0)	172 (33.9)	91 (17.9)	27 (5.3)	14 (2.8)
E9	I think I did well in learning the English language compared to other students	508	3.69	1.212	14 (2.8)	67 (13.2)	139 (27.4)	172 (33.9)	83 (16.3)	24 (4.7)	9 (1.8)
E10	After learning the English language for awhile, I felt pretty competent	502	4.17	1.161	8 (1.6)	26 (5.2)	100 (19.9)	177 (35.3)	132 (26.3)	50 (10.0)	9 (1.8)
E11	I am satisfied with my performance in learning the English language	505	3.75	1.288	19 (3.8)	64 (12.7)	124 (24.6)	168 (33.3)	85 (16.8)	35 (6.9)	10 (2.0)

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Table 8 (Continued)

Item	Questions	N	mean	SD	Response values frequencies						
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E12	I have acquired the skills in learning the English language	501	4.05	1.126	2 (0.4)	42 (8.4)	100 (20.0)	198 (39.5)	109 (21.8)	42 (8.4)	8 (1.6)
E13	Learning the English language was an activity that I could not do very well	505	3.67	1.352	30 (5.9)	71 (14.1)	120 (23.8)	148 (29.3)	94 (18.6)	34 (6.7)	8 (1.6)
Section C: Effort/importance											
E14	I put a lot of effort into learning the English language	506	4.40	1.127	4 (0.8)	10 (2.0)	88 (17.4)	180 (35.6)	148 (29.2)	55 (10.9)	21 (4.2)
E15	I did not try very hard to do well in learning the English language	504	3.31	1.429	54 (10.7)	106 (21.0)	114 (22.6)	132 (26.2)	66 (13.1)	22 (4.4)	10 (2.0)
E16	I tried very hard to learn the English language	505	4.54	1.375	9 (1.8)	24 (4.8)	76 (15.0)	141 (27.9)	125 (24.8)	89 (17.6)	41 (8.1)
E17	Learning the English language is important to me	505	5.42	1.356	0 (0)	7 (1.4)	43 (8.5)	87 (17.2)	108 (21.4)	116 (23.0)	144 (28.5)
E18	I did not put much effort in learning the English language	504	3.47	1.582	72 (14.3)	68 (13.5)	115 (22.8)	116 (23.0)	82 (16.3)	35 (6.9)	16 (3.2)
Section D: Values/usefulness											
E19	I believe learning the English language could be of some value to me	505	5.48	1.323	0 (0)	9 (1.8)	31 (6.1)	88 (17.4)	102 (20.2)	132 (26.1)	143 (28.3)

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Table 8 (*Continued*)

Item	Questions	N	mean	SD	Response values frequencies						
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E20	I think that learning the English language is useful for my future.	506	5.65	1.352	2 (0.4)	4 (0.8)	31 (6.1)	81 (16.0)	80 (15.8)	122 (24.1)	186 (36.8)
E21	I would be willing to learn the English language again because it has some value to me.	503	5.45	1.345	0 (0)	8 (1.6)	36 (7.2)	95 (18.9)	90 (17.9)	133 (26.4)	141 (28.0)
E22	I believe learning the English language could be beneficial to me.	503	5.67	1.289	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	31 (6.2)	81 (16.1)	74 (14.7)	144 (28.6)	171 (34.0)
E23	I think learning the English language is an important activity.	502	5.68	1.310	0 (0)	7 (1.4)	25 (5.0)	77 (15.3)	85 (16.9)	127 (25.3)	181 (36.1)

(N = number of respondents, SD = standard deviation, number in bracket = valid percentage)

Testing of Hypothesis 1 (H₀₁)

The relationship between the learners' perception towards the TP of the course lecturer (LectTP) and the learners' intrinsic motivation (IM) to learn the English language via distance education was investigated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. This was to test Hypothesis 1 (H₀₁);

H₀1: *There is no relationship between the learners' perception towards the transactional presence of the course lecturer and learners' intrinsic motivation to learn the English language via distance education.*

The alternative hypothesis was:

H_a1: *There is a relationship between the learners' perception towards the transactional presence of the course lecturer and the learners' intrinsic motivation to learn the English language via distance education.*

Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was a medium, positive correlation between the two variables [$r = 0.463$, $n = 468$, $p < .0005$]; with a high level of the TP of the course lecturer associated with a high level of intrinsic motivation. Hence, the null hypothesis (H₀1) was not accepted while the alternative hypothesis (H_a1) was a correlation of $r = 0.463$, when squared indicates 21.43% shared of variance ($0.463 \times 0.463 \times 100\% = 21.43$). This indicated that the lecturer's TP helped to explain for more than 21% of the variance in the students' scores on intrinsic motivation to learn English via distance education.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrate that a high level of TP on the part of the course lecturer would increase distance learners' intrinsic motivation to learn the English language at the SDE. With this, learners would not be deterred from interacting with their lecturers using the learned language. Instead, they become highly motivated to learn the language. Overall, the findings of the study showed that the students appeared to have a positive attitude towards learning the English language. Their responses in the questionnaire depicted that they enjoyed as well as had interest and desire to excel in the English course. This situation concurs with the point made by Reeve et al. (2007) that students are intrinsically motivated for activities that they perceive as being personally interesting and enjoyable.

Moore (1973; 1991) stressed that psychological “distance” is a theoretical construct or a variable that can be manipulated by instructional design or a set of institutional arrangements. Hence, psychological distance in the distance learning context can be reduced especially through e-learning. This can actually increase the students’ perception of the TP of the course lecturer and thus cater to the particular learning needs of these students. Students can participate in frequent discussions via e-mails or channelled through social networks such as Facebook and also through blogs where they can type short sentences to express their thoughts and queries. Such a context would create platforms for learners to interact and feel a sense of availability of the lecturer. These support Shin’s (2003) point that the success of distance learners is influenced by the relationship between the educator and the learners. This relationship will help facilitate the distance learners’ learning interest, improve their learning achievement, increase their learning satisfaction and sustain their learning persistence.

This study has enriched the distance education theory and research. The scholarly significance of this study depicts that learners are motivated when they perceive a high level of TP of their course lecturer. Shin (2003) argued that TP is an important indicator for students’ success in distance education. This would enhance the learners’ motivation in learning through distance education settings.

The study also raised other interesting questions. How does the lecturer’s TP affect the students’ self-initiated interaction? Are the students influenced by the TP of their course mates? Which of these has a greater influence over the students’ intrinsic motivation? These issues correspond to the point that distance learners possessing high TP can be conjectured to feel less alone (McWhirter, 1990) and are better able to manage their needs and emotions (Lee and Robbins, 1998). Derrick (2003) affirmed that students need to take the initiative to be independent, persistent and trust in their ability to plan and implement the measures required to engage in learning. Hence, it would be interesting to examine how the students’ perceived TP of the lecturer or course mates affect their self-initiated interaction to engage in learning. These questions are being addressed in a separate research. The findings will be disseminated in forthcoming papers.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations in this study. Firstly, the selected variables for TP were limited to the course lecturer. This was because the availability and connectedness towards the course lecturer were the key aspects that were considered in the research design of this study. However, more studies could be conducted to investigate other variables such as the students' perception of the TP of their peers.

The gender distribution of the subjects was uneven, skewed towards females (61.1%), which meant that the sample was more representative of female distance students. Thus, any attempt to generalise the findings of this investigation to other institutional, societal, and cultural contexts of distance education would need to be approached with caution.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between distance learners' perceived TP of the course lecturer and their intrinsic motivation. Based on the findings, the following recommendations to providers, designers and instructors of courses in distance education are made.

1. Be aware of the needs and expectations of distance learners in terms of perceived TP, i.e., the perceived availability and connectedness of the students to the lecturers.
2. Enhance the students' perception about the TP of the lecturer. This can be achieved if the lecturer responds promptly to students' emails and queries, participates actively in students' blogs, chat rooms and discussions to increase learners' intrinsic motivation to learn English via distance education.

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