

Challenges Faced by Distance Learners to Learn the English Language at The School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper reports the challenges faced by adult distance learners to learn English at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia. A total of 512 distance learners from the JUE 300 English II course completed the survey questionnaire. The findings show that students reported a lack of training for communication skills using the English language, insufficient hours of lectures and face-to-face interactions, a time consuming Intensive course and issues with downloading from the e-portal as the main factors making it difficult for the distance learners to learn English. Based on these findings, the authors recommend that designers and instructors of distance language learning courses become familiar with theories of distance learning and second language acquisition. To ensure the quality of the course, course designers and instructors should plan the course well in terms of using comprehensible texts and audio-visual materials, ensuring an appropriate level of difficulty, and implementing quality methods, interactions and assessments using an approach that is appropriate and conducive to the situational context of distance learners so they find the course engaging, relevant and meaningful. Distance learning is flexible in terms of time and location, but students may experience reduced levels of face-to-face interaction. Technological advancements and support from well-trained and committed technicians can enable the instructors to provide appropriate content and offer increased interactive sessions via teleconferencing with the distance learners.

Keywords: English language, distance education, factors inducing difficulties

Introduction

English is a second language in Malaysia due to its importance for academic, economic and political matters (Ali, 1995). The English language is taught as a second language in all Malaysian schools as a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools. Students are exposed to the language in their first year of primary school, and English is taught until the fifth year of their secondary school, constituting 11 years of formal learning of the English language in Malaysia for Malaysian students. Students who intend to pursue their tertiary education at Malaysian universities have to take the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), an English proficiency assessment course for students, before seeking entry into local Malaysian universities (Malaysian Examination Council, 2006).

The programmes pioneered by the School of Distance Education (SDE) at Universiti Sains (USM) since 1971 can be considered a second chance for the working adults in Malaysia to attain a higher education (Rozhan, 2007). Bahasa Malaysia is the main medium of instruction for most of the subjects at the SDE. However, depending on the band they obtained on the MUET, it is compulsory for distance learners to pass the SDE's English Language courses in order to graduate (School of Distance Education Guidebook 2013/2014). Students who have not taken the MUET are required to at least sit for the exam during their course of studies.

This paper concentrates on the JUE 300 English II course. This course is an upper-intermediate course concerned with improving students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, as well as improving students' grammar and vocabulary. The course aspires to provide the students with the knowledge and skills to communicate effectively in everyday activities, as well as in academic and job contexts. In the JUE 300 English II course, the students are given a module comprising 10 units for them to study on their own. Five audio recorded lectures are also uploaded in the SDE e-learning portal that the students can access at their convenience. In addition, there are also two face-to-face sessions during the Intensive course. The students are assessed via written coursework, continuous assessment and the final exam; however, it does not matter which band the distance learners obtained.

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Keegan (1986) explains that distance education differs from conventional face-to-face education specifically because there is a semi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the learning process. A student is not required to travel to a fixed place or at a certain time in order to learn from a particular instructor. Instead, distance learners and teachers can communicate or interact occasionally either face-to-face or electronically for both teaching and learning purposes. Distance learning offers the convenience of time and location, as students need not be physically present with the instructor. This is a great advantage for non-traditional adult students. Salleh (1999) notes that in the SDE, USM programmes, the students are provided with self-instructional modules and other materials, such as audio-video materials and slides. Students have to access the internet, listen to radio broadcasts and attend teleconferencing sessions at the numerous regional centres throughout Malaysia.

Nevertheless, adult distance learners returning to formal education may face various barriers and challenges as they try to manage their studies because of work commitments, age, or family responsibilities; therefore, they need a course with flexibility and a supportive environment to be successful in their learning (Cross, 1981). Distance learning theories such as that of Moore and Kearsley (1996) assert that distance educators should provide three types of interaction: namely, learner-content, learner-instructor and learner-learner. In terms of language learning, Krashen's second language acquisition theory (1994) stresses that comprehensible input is critical for second language acquisition and that interaction influences second language acquisition. Meanwhile, White (2003) notes that distance language learning has evolved from traditional print-based correspondence courses to courses delivered entirely online with extensive opportunities for interaction, feedback and support between teachers and learners and among the learners themselves.

Based on a study at the SDE USM, Dass (2001) finds that the distance learners faced problems with their English language courses. The two greatest challenges identified by the students at the SDE, USM were time management (75.5 per cent) and study-related problems (74.9 per cent). Dass notes that this could be due to the medium of instruction in the

Malaysian public education system, which is Bahasa Malaysia. Belaja, Teoh and Liao (2012) report that a high level of course lecturer transactional presence was linked to increased intrinsic motivation of the distance learners to learn English at the SDE, USM.

Statement of the Problem

There are approximately 1000–1200 adult distance learners who register for the JUE 300 English II course annually. These returning adult learners are busy with their jobs, family commitments and studies involving other major and minor subjects. They register for JUE 300 English as their University course, but they must score at least a C in order to pass this course as part of their graduation requirements. This study hopes to elicit the challenges faced by the distance learners in learning English and possibly recommend measures to ameliorate the challenges.

Objectives of the Study

This research aimed to investigate the distance learners' views about the challenges they faced in learning the English language. The course designer and instructor need to be aware of the factors that present difficulties for distance learners in learning English in order to plan for and make necessary changes to implement a successful course that allows students to achieve the course objectives. The following research question was addressed: What are the challenges faced by students attempting to learn the English language via distance education?

Methodology

Students in the JUE 300 English II course were asked to complete questionnaires that were distributed during their first Intensive course lecture. The students were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they would not receive any extra credit or reward for participating. The students were asked to submit their questionnaire in collection boxes located at the SDE and the lecturer's main office before the end of the Intensive course. Altogether, 512 students completed and returned the questionnaire.

There were three sections in the questionnaire. Section A consisted of items regarding the aspects of the English language that learners find

difficult to learn. These included writing, speaking, reading, listening, pronunciation, grammar, spelling and vocabulary. Section B consisted of 16 items (please refer to Table 1) concerning the factors that present difficulties for students while learning the English language via distance education. There were 31 items in Section C related to the reasons why students find language learning via distance education to be difficult, and identifying these factors was the primary focus of this study. Respondents were required to choose their responses to the items in the questionnaire from a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree).

The questionnaire was checked and validated by a senior lecturer from the SDE USM who has taught English language via distance education for many years. The data were analysed using SPSS IBM version 19.0. The Cronbach's alpha value for Section B concerning factors presenting difficulties for learners to learn the English language via distance education was 0.845. Darren and Mallery (2003) stipulated that a Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of > 0.8 is deemed reliable.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the factors presenting difficulties for the students to learn the English Language via distance education.

Table 1 Factors presenting difficulties for learners to learn the English language via distance education

Item	Questions	N	μ	SD
B1	I feel that it is difficult to meet the lecturer to ask for guidance.	499	2.78	0.856
B2	The lecturer will not give immediate feedback whenever I post a question in the portal.	499	2.26	0.875
B3	I did not get any feedback from the lecturer regarding my mistakes in my assignment/exercise and on how to improve it.	501	2.44	1.000
B4	I feel that it is difficult to improve my command of the English language through distance education.	499	2.81	0.887
B5	The lecture hours for the English course per academic year are not sufficient.	498	3.22	0.911
B6	I feel there is a lack of training for communication skills using the English language.	497	3.24	0.862
B7	The schedule during the Intensive Course is too packed with courses.	499	3.03	0.969
B8	There is always a technical problem when I download material from the portal.	501	3.03	1.045
B9	The information /exercises given in the portal are not sufficient to help improve my command of the English language.	500	2.59	0.963
B10	I cannot understand what the lecturer is saying in the lecture.	498	2.13	0.915
B11	I feel that there is a lack of interaction between lecturer and students as well as among students.	495	2.81	0.883
B12	I feel that there is a lack of a classroom setting for face-to-face interaction with the lecturer.	493	3.00	0.875
B13	There is a low level of interaction through the portal (email, forums and chats).	496	2.89	0.794
B14	There are not enough exercises given.	498	2.67	0.874
B15	The learning module/ material is not sufficient for my learning of the English language.	497	2.54	0.933
B16	There is no internet connection in my residential area.	495	2.07	1.106

N = number of respondents, μ = mean, SD = standard deviation

By using the mean values 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, the findings of the study showed that the students were not overwhelmed by any particular issue. This is possibly because some students appear to be managing quite well in the course. The five main challenges faced by the students were as follows:

- 1) I feel there is a lack of training for communication skills using the English language (B 6, mean = 3.24).
- 2) The lecture hours for the English course per academic year are not sufficient (B 5, mean = 3.22)
- 3) The schedule during the Intensive Course is too packed with courses (B 7, mean = 3.03).
- 4) There is always a technical problem when I download material from the portal (B 8, mean = 3.03).
- 5) I feel that there is a lack of a classroom setting for face-to-face interaction with the lecturer (B 12, mean = 3.00).

The lack of training in English language communication skills was found to be the main challenge facing distance learners. In the academic schedule of the JUE 300 English II course, the students only met the lecturer during the Intensive course for two two-hour lectures. Students indicated this level of interaction was insufficient for their learning. The class size of 1000–1200 students did not allow for much interaction. It would be ideal if the lecturer or other assistant instructors could be available to assist the students at the various regional centres throughout Malaysia. This would address the students' complaint that there was a lack of face-to face interaction in a classroom setting with the lecturer. The SDE USM management should consider the possibility of doing this to address the students' grievances because as Krashen's second language acquisition theory (1994) emphasised, interaction is important in second language acquisition.

Additionally, the distance learners felt burdened by the full schedule during the Intensive Course. During the Intensive course, the distance learners were in residence at USM for approximately 4 weeks. This was the opportunity for the students to attend face-to-face lectures, to conduct their field work, to complete their course work such as oral tests or

assignments, to carry out laboratory work and to sit for their continuous assessments. Because there were so many tasks during this time, it is possible that they did not have sufficient time to interact with the course lecturer and their course-mates to work on their English.

Next, the students complained of technical problems when downloading materials from the SDE USM e-learning portal. This could be caused by problems with the uploaded materials, technical issues caused by the students' internet service provider or, at times, the students' lack of technological savvy. The SDE USM has a number of technicians manning the portal service and has also provided training to the academic staff on how to manage the USM e-learning system. Both the academic and support staff are responsible for providing good support services for the students to access the materials that are being given by the instructors.

Students highlighted that there was little interaction via email or in the forum of the e-learning portal (B 13, mean 2.89) and between lecturer-students and students-students (B 11, mean 2.81). Although the students have been encouraged to participate in the forums of the e-learning portal, only a small number of students participated in the forums. It could be that some students were too busy with their other commitments or chose not to participate. However, it is important that the course instructor increase interaction because as Moore and Kearsley (1996) asserted, distance educators should provide three types of interaction: learner-content, learner-instructor and learner-learner.

The distance learners also mentioned that it was difficult to meet the lecturer to ask for guidance (B 1, mean 2.78). This was understandable, as the students were distance learners separated physically from the instructor except during the Intensive course. However, the perceived availability and connectedness of the instructors is important to help motivate the distance learners (Belaja, Teoh and Liao, 2012); it is vital that distance learning instructors try to respond to the students' emails and feedback as soon as possible. Some students felt that it was difficult to improve their command of the English language through distance education (B 4, mean 2.81). They most likely were not used to the distance learning mode, as it is more challenging compared to the traditional language learning environment. Students also cited insufficiencies in the exercises (B 14, mean 2.67), information (B 9, mean 2.59) and materials

(B 15, mean 2.54) given to help them improve their learning of English. The SDE USM students are supplied with a module and exercises in the e-learning portal based on Krashen's (1994) theory that comprehensible input is critical for second language acquisition. However, the distance learners are also encouraged to obtain additional learning materials that can be accessed free of charge from the internet or purchased to improve their language proficiency. Items B3 (mean 2.44), B2 (mean 2.26), B10 (mean 2.13) and B16 (mean 2.07) have mean values lower than 2.50 and are considered as minor challenges faced by distance learners of English. It is encouraging that Dass (2001) concluded that the distance learners are resilient in coping with their problems and that distance learning is a modality where students have a control over their learning.

Limitations of the Study

This study highlights the distance learners' views about the challenges they faced in learning English at the SDE USM. It would have been interesting to determine the students' overall satisfaction with the course and their course grades, as well as the course instructor's comments about the students' engagement in the course.

Conclusion

To address the challenges faced by the distance learners while learning the English language via distance education, the authors would like to make the following recommendations for designers and instructors of language learning courses in distance education. Course designers and instructors must be aware of the theories of distance learning and second language acquisition. They should also be sensitive to the individual differences and needs of the students. To ensure the quality of the course, course designers and instructors should plan the course well by using comprehensible texts and audio-visual materials and by choosing appropriate levels of difficulty and adequate methods, interactions and assessments. This would allow the students to find the course engaging, relevant and meaningful in a manner appropriate and conducive to the situational context of distance learners.

Additionally, an understanding, encouraging, approachable and helpful instructor will definitely help reduce the students' difficulties in learning English via distance education and can assist weaker students with

achieving success in the course. At the same time, the administration should look at the number of students in the course and address the issue of the students' desire for more face-to face interaction with the lecturers. Due to the nature of distance learning, which allows for flexibility in time and location, students may experience a lack of face-to-face interaction; however, technological improvements and support from well-trained and committed technicians can help the instructors deliver better content to the students and provide more interactive sessions via teleconference. Furthermore, distance learners, especially the weaker ones, must do their part by engaging in the course. For example, they should spend an appropriate amount of time studying to digest the content provided and take the initiative to improve their English language proficiency, such as by forming study groups, interacting with the instructor and peers and preparing for oral presentations, writing assignments and assessments to ensure effective output and learning.

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