

DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING: STUDENTS' VIEWS OF CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings from the first stage qualitative data analysis of a longitudinal study investigating factors that affect students' achievement in a distance learning English writing course. Data were collected from mandatory self-report questions embedded in questionnaires that were distributed by post and an online survey. The participants included 164 students studying in the English Department of an open university in Indonesia¹. The participants were asked to identify the challenges they encountered during their learning on the first of four writing courses. They were also asked to identify possible solutions to the challenges. Their responses were analysed using NVivo version 10 and the responses were then coded and grouped into themes. An emerging area related to student expectation was identified. To reduce biases of the researcher, two randomly selected samples of the responses were reviewed through a double-blind review. The findings show that the challenges fell into three categories: academic, technical, and personal issues. Similarly, solutions consisted of the same three issues. Meanwhile, student expectations focused on academic and technical issues.

Key Words: Distance learning, challenges, solutions, expectations.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the findings from the first stage qualitative data analysis of a longitudinal study investigating factors that affected students' achievement on a distance learning course in English writing. Self-report questions asked the participants to identify the challenges they faced during the Writing 1 course in semester 2, 2012, and the solutions to those challenges. The main aim was to gain a more detailed understanding of the challenges that distance language learning students face and the solutions they use to overcome them. The analysis shows that the challenges faced by distance learning students are complex, particularly for those who are new to distance learning and English language learning and in full time employment. Some findings correspond with those of previous studies, such as Galusha (1997) and Croft, Dalton, and Grant (2010). Interestingly, the analysis identified an emerging area related to student expectations to improve the learning process.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Unlike conventional university students, distance learning students are physically separated from the lecturers and other students (Holmberg, 1989). The teaching and learning process is carried out by means of media and technology (Keegan, 1980). Moreover, the rapid development of technology has made a significant

¹ To maintain compliance with ethics principles, the name of the university was written anonymously

contribution to the development of distance learning and has contributed to the characteristics of distance learning (Taylor, 1999).

Despite the development of technology, Galusha (1997) identifies the following six major problems facing distance learning students: cost and motivators, interactivity with lecturers, student support, feeling isolated, lack of experience and lack of training. This implies that distance learning students are expected to have skills and abilities to cope with these problems. The problems are often coupled with family and work responsibilities for those who have family and are in employment. As most distance learning students are adults and in employment (The Commonwealth of Learning, 2010), study time often interferes with family commitments and personal and employment responsibilities. A study by Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos, and Vergidis (2004) found that family and personal matters, study and employment responsibilities, lack of support and lack of prerequisite knowledge were challenges that students faced, which in turn led them to withdraw from the programme of study. A more recent study by Rakes, Dunn, and Rakes (2013) found that distractions caused by family and employment responsibilities prevents students from studying.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The large scale longitudinal study of this research employed quantitative and qualitative methods. This article reports on the first stage qualitative analysis. Self-report questions were distributed through postal and online surveys. The participants included students studying in the English Department of an open university in Indonesia. A non-probability sampling procedure (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) was taken, based on specific criteria. Students who registered for the Writing 1 course in semester 2, 2012 were included in the sample and their progress was followed up to Writing 4, the highest level of writing course.

Instrumentation

A survey was selected as the participants resided not only in Indonesia, but also in other countries such as, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Greece and Ukraine. The questions were formulated in Indonesian and participation in the survey was optional. To check content validity and face validity as suggested by Robson (2011), two Indonesians who were experts in distance learning were involved in reviewing the questions. For the purpose of reporting, the self-report questions were translated into English by the researcher. Following the guidelines of Sperber (2004), the English version of the self-report questions went through a back translation process into Indonesian by a translator to maintain the meaning of the original version. The self-report questions were piloted to check readability from similar participants to those in the survey (Williams, 2003). Thirty students who had taken the Writing 1 examination in the previous semester were randomly selected and invited to participate in the pilot study. Twenty-two of them completed the questionnaires that were distributed through the Bristol Online Survey (BOS).

Participants

The participants were all Indonesian distance learning students studying in the English Department of an open university in Indonesia. For the purpose of a longitudinal study design, students who took the Writing English 1 examination in Semester 2, 2012 were considered as a cohort. It should be noted that registration is open and ongoing all year round; thus this study focused only on following the progress of the students in the cohort. Repeated research design with the same participants within the cohort aimed to gather information related to the factors that affected achievement and dropout in writing courses. The privacy and confidentiality used in the data collection remained protected at all times. Participants' names and all information about them, as well as their responses were protected, remained confidential and were not accessible by other people, parties, or the institution where they study. To distinguish responses given by different participants, the participants were coded using unique numbers. Thus, the participants' names did not appear on the report and all information referring to names, places or institutions were written anonymously. At last, the written and electronic data were deposited securely and were kept confidential.

Four hundred and five students took the Writing 1 examination in Semester 2, 2012 at various examination centres both in Indonesia and overseas. One hundred and sixty four students participated in the survey by

completing either postal or online surveys (return rate was 40%). The participants consisted of 50 male students (30%) and 114 female students (70%). The following table illustrates the participants' demographic information.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

	Frequency	Percentage
Age group		
Under 23 years	53	32
23-30 years	61	37
31-38 years	34	21
Over 38	16	10
Marital status		
Married	52	32
Not married	112	68
Prior education		
High school/equivalent	136	83
Diploma 3	11	7
Undergraduate/S1	12	7
Graduate/S2	5	3
Employment status		
Employed	139	85
Not employed	25	15
Type of employment		
Full time	110	79
Part time	29	21
Job relevant to programme of studies		
Less than 50%	69	50
More than 50%	70	50
Number of working hours a week		
Less than 40 hours	33	24
40 hours	31	22
More than 40 hours	75	54

Data Collection And Analysis

Eighty-two copies of the questionnaire, together with the research cover letter were sent by post to those participants who did not have access to the internet with stamped return envelopes provided. Meanwhile, survey invitation letters were sent by post to 323 participants who had access to the internet. The invitation letter explained that the researcher had sent them an email to participate in the survey and asked them to check their email. This procedure was taken based on the lesson learnt from the pilot study. The link to complete the online survey was provided in the email. The return rate of the postal survey was 18%, while the return rate of the online survey was 46%. The postal and online survey results were then combined. A total of 164 participants completed the questionnaires (return rate was 40%). Since completing the self-report section was compulsory, 164 responses were submitted. Each response was analysed carefully several times to identify the key information. The information was then coded and clustered using NVivo v.10. To reduce researcher bias, two randomly selected samples of the responses were reviewed through a double-blind review as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The results were then compared and any differences were discussed with the second reviewer.

FINDINGS

This section presents the result of the analysis which focused on the most difficult challenges students faced during their learning on the Writing 1 course, and their suggestions for overcoming the problems. The challenges fell into three categories: academic issues; technical issues; and personal issues. Similarly, the solutions were grouped into the same three categories. However, after scrutinizing all the answers carefully, an emerging issue was raised by some participants, which highlighted the expectations of students to improve the learning process. The expectations focused on: academic issues and technical issues. Accordingly, there were three main features to analyse: the challenges; the solutions and the expectations.

Challenges

Academic issues

There were eight themes related to academic issues: lack of feedback, applying theoretical lessons, understanding different writing styles, forecasting the examination materials, making translations, poor vocabulary, understanding grammar, writing compositions based on specific instructions and writing styles.

Understanding the grammar was the most serious challenge as it received greater attention from the participants (40 participants). Regarding the three issues, one student commented:

“For me, making composition is the most difficult (task)... sometimes I am confused how to make correct sentences.” (Student-female)

Meanwhile, thirty-two participants felt that limited knowledge of vocabulary was a major challenge they experienced on the English Writing 1 course.

“The most difficult situation is when I write a composition, I fail to find the most suitable words (to express my ideas). I have to find other expressions or phrases which have similar meanings to the words that I want to use.” (Student-female)

The other major problem was the lack of feedback. Twenty-four participants noted that lack of feedback, particularly from the lecturer of the Writing 1 course and the Writing 1 online tutor was a barrier to developing their writing skills. The respondents who participated in the online tutorial wanted to receive formative feedback on their assignments and exercises that not only showed them the weaknesses and strengths of their work, but also provided advice, guidance and support for improvement of their writing skills. As one participant commented:

"(The challenge is) the lack of feedback when doing the writing exercises. If there is a feedback, I will be able to find the strengths and the weaknesses of the compositions that I made. The feedback is expected to give improvement or correct the mistakes (that I made)." (Student-female)

Technical issues

Seven themes were identified from the analysis: absence of communication with the lecturer and online tutor; absence of a face-to-face tutorial; difficulty in purchasing course materials; limited opportunities to practise speaking and listening skills; limited time in the examination; being unfamiliar with modern technology; and poor quality of course materials. Comments related to each theme were almost equally distributed. However, absence of communication with the lecturer and online tutor received more attention from the participants. The following is an example of a comment related to this issue:

"I cannot ask the lecturer directly and I cannot have a discussion with other students who register the same courses." (Student-female)

Personal issues

The themes related to the personal challenges that students faced covered the following: becoming an autonomous student; isolation; discipline; limited time to study; pace of learning; lack of motivation; lack of enthusiasm and interest in writing. Among the issues, limited time to study and feelings of isolation received greater attention from the participants.

Twenty five participants reported that they did not have enough time to study due to their employment responsibilities.

"The most difficult or challenging situation is that I spend most my time to work. Therefore, I do not have time to learn the English writing 1 course." (Student-male)

Another twenty three participants reported the major challenge as feelings of isolation from other students, lecturer and online tutor. As one participant commented:

"I do not know where to ask for help. Sometimes, I browse the internet to find the answers for my problems or I use Google Translate to check my composition, but it is confusing because grammatically the sentences are not correct." (Student-female)

Solutions

Academic issues

The solutions for coping with academic challenges are: regularly adding new vocabulary; learning the grammar more seriously; learning from other people's compositions; making translations; making drafts of compositions; doing more writing practices; speaking English more frequently; improving listening skills; relearning unclear topics, reading English texts; and watching English programmes. The four themes mentioned most frequently by the participants were: reading English texts; regularly adding new vocabulary; learning the grammar more seriously; and doing more writing practice.

Eighteen participants stated that reading English texts, such as newspapers, novels, and books helped them to improve their writing skills. For example, one participant said:

"I also often read English literatures to help me improve my English writing skills, because I believe that those who are able to write are those who read much." (Student-female)

Seven participants were aware that they needed to enrich their vocabulary in order to write well. As one participant said:

"I read English books or newspaper to enrich my vocabulary words. In addition, I can also learn grammatical structures of the texts I read." (Student-female)

Seven participants reported that to improve their writing skills, they needed to learn the grammar more seriously. The participants mentioned that they studied the English grammar from the course material as well as other sources.

"I need to learn more the English grammar, so that I can write compositions that follow the structures correctly." (Student-female)

Meanwhile, six participants suggested that doing more practice to write would help them to improve their writing skills. One participant commented:

"I continuously practice writing compositions. I think there is an improvement." (Student-female)

Technical issues

There were eleven themes related to technical issues. However, the following four themes received greater attention from the participants: contacting other people; finding other learning sources; forming a study group; accessing the internet.

Twenty-two participants mentioned that they contacted other people to overcome the challenges they met during the Writing 1 course. The people they contacted were peers, lecturers, acquaintance and employers.

"To cope with the difficulties while learning, I share the problems I have with other students who take the same courses with me." (Student-female)

Nine participants looked for other learning sources, either printed or online, to help them to find the answers to the problems they had. As one participant said:

"I learn from different sources. I buy books if they are available in my place and I also access the internet." (Student-female)

Seven participants suggested that forming a study group helped them to find the most suitable answers to the challenges they found.

"I try to discuss a topic I do not understand in a study group. This helps me and I can help other students. Having friends who always remind me to complete the assignments, for example, means that I have friends who care of me. I do not want to waste this chance." (Student-male)

Meanwhile, six participants commented that accessing the internet was an effective solution for coping with the challenges. One participant commented:

"I log on to learning websites available on the Internet." (Student-female)

Personal issues

Themes related to finding solutions to manage personal issues included: giving full commitment; making a learning schedule; reminding themselves of the importance of their study; and creating the most suitable learning strategies. The theme that received most attention was building and maintaining self-motivation. As one participant said:

"I have to motivate myself and evaluate the learning strategies that I use." (Student-male)

Expectations

The expectations of students were revealed in the analysis. Participants expected to receive support, particularly from the institution, for a more effective learning experience. The expectations of students fell into two broad categories: academic issues and technical issues.

Academic issues

Seven themes related to academic issues were identified: feedback from the lecturer/online tutor; face-to-face tutorial sessions; more assignments on the course material; more examples on the course material; more grammar explanations on the course materials; more online tutorial sessions; and supplementary vocabulary words on the course materials. Two themes received greater attention from the participants: feedback from the lecturer or online tutor and face-to-face tutorial sessions. Talking about these issues, ten participants mentioned that they expected to receive feedback from the lecturer or online tutor on the assignments they submitted. Furthermore, some participants suggested that the feedback should be in the form of individual formative feedback, so that they were able to learn from it. As one participant said:

"I hope that the lecturers give feedback on the assignments that I do in the form of showing the mistakes and making correcting, so that I will learn the strengths and weaknesses of my compositions. I am sure this will improve my writing skills." (Student-female)

Meanwhile, six participants expected to have face-to-face tutorial sessions as an alternative method for learning. Talking about this issue, one participant said:

"I think it will be better if there is an offline meeting with a lecturer, but the schedule should be adjusted to suit the availability of the working students." (Student-male)

Technical issues

The following four themes emerged from the analysis of the technical issues: forming a student association; multimedia learning packages; access to the university website; and direct communication with the lecturer. The latter received the most attention. Thirteen participants expressed that they expected to have direct communication with the lecturer. The expectations of students related to having direct contact with the lecturer can in fact be categorised both as an academic and a technical issue. From the academic perspective, students expected to have more opportunities to discuss the subjects they learnt with the lecturer. From the technical perspectives, providing a synchronous communication with a large number of students is difficult to make.

"I hope that I can communicate directly with the lecturer, so that I can discuss any problems I face while learning the Writing 1 course. This will help me understand the topics I learn better." (Student-female)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the challenges are particularly complex. However, understanding the grammar, limited knowledge of vocabulary, lack of feedback, limited time to study, and feelings of isolation received greater attention as major challenges. Difficulties in understanding the grammar and limited knowledge of vocabulary might arise from the fact that English in Indonesia is a foreign language (Lauder, 2010). Issues related to limited knowledge of vocabulary was also relevant to the study conducted by Nurweni and Read (1999).

Lack of feedback from the lecturer and the online tutor was another theme that received greater attention from the participants. The participants expected to have timely and formative feedback to improve their writing skills. Hyland (2001) argues that in distance learning feedback connected the students and the lecturers. Meanwhile, Ali and Ahmad (2011) found that the provision of feedback is also related to student satisfaction in

distance learning. The findings of the current study show that the absence of feedback had serious consequences and had an impact on students' motivation to study. This was in agreement with Hyland (2001) who shows that feedback from lecturers promotes student motivation and improves student achievement. Further, Hurd (2007) concludes that absence of feedback coupled with isolation from lecturers and other students has an impact on anxiety among distance learning students.

Another challenge for respondents was the limited time they had to study. Working students found that employment responsibilities prevented them from studying. As shown in Table 1, 85 per cent of the participants were in full time employment and 76 per cent of them had long working hours per week. Meanwhile, students who were married and had children saw that family responsibilities often prevented them from studying. In a distance learning context, student achievement is linked to the students' ability to manage their time for their study, family and employment (Kember, 1989). Pierrakeas et al. (2004) conclude that family and employment responsibilities are associated with student progression. Limited time to study is a serious challenge faced by distance learning students. Simpson (2006) claims that distance learning students who study for less than 15 hours a week are more likely to drop out.

The participants of this study also expressed feelings of isolation. They felt separated from the institution (lecturer and online tutor) and peers. This finding supports previous research conducted by Croft et al. (2010) indicating that feelings of isolation are considered a challenge. In addition, Nash (2005) found that feeling isolated was a common phenomenon in a distance learning context. Furthermore, Venter (2003) found that feelings of isolation, particularly from the teachers, led students to feel anxious. Feeling isolated experienced by distance learning student is seen as an indication of lack of support and services from the university (Galusha, 1997).

The majority of the students in this study were able to identify solutions for the challenges they faced. The findings indicate that the students had self-determination skills to overcome the problems. Some of the solutions to overcome the challenges articulated by the participants were in agreement with the suggestions made by Croft et al. (2010) in this respect; these include joining an online community. The analysis of the solutions the students suggested shows that motivation was a potential factor in stimulating other elements, such as doing more practice and looking for other learning sources. Previous studies, such as conducted by Wang, Peng, Huang, Hou, and Wang (2008) and Radovan (2011) found that motivation was associated with achievement. Thus, motivation deserved further investigations as it contributed to learning persistence (Galusha, 1997; Matsumoto & Obana, 2001).

The basic principle of the expectations articulated by the participants was an expectation to have better communication with the lecturer or online tutor. Expectation to receive feedback from the lecturer or online tutor was very important in the distance learning context as it is a means of communication between the students and lecturer (Hyland, 2001). However, providing feedback for a great number of students in a distance learning context is a time consuming process (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Self-report embedded in the questionnaire aimed to identify the challenges the participants faced during the learning process as well as the way they overcame the problems. The following conclusions can be drawn from the current study. The participants were able to identify the problems they faced during the learning process and they were able to identify solutions to address the problems. The challenges and the solutions were categorized into academic, technical and personal issues. The most notable academic issues related to: understanding the grammar, poor vocabulary, and lack of feedback. Meanwhile, the leading technical issues were: the quality of course material and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy. In addition, the main problems relating to personal issues were: limited time available to study and feelings of isolation.

The participants were able to identify solutions to the problems they faced. These included reading English texts, expanding their vocabulary by making lists of new words and learning grammar. The most common

solutions offered regarding technical issues were making a contact with other people, finding other learning sources and access to the Internet. Emerging issues appeared during the analysis of the participants' answers to the self-report. The participants suggested that they expected to have more direct interaction with the lecturer or online tutor. The empirical findings in this study have provided a more detailed understanding of the challenges faced by distance language learning students and the initiatives they took to cope with the challenges as well as their expectations for a better learning process. Finally, the analysis produced beneficial results as a consideration of some major points that can be used to provide better learning support.

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