



E-learning: Reasons students in language learning courses don't want to



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 August 2013

Received in revised form

15 January 2014

Accepted 20 January 2014

Keywords:

Motivation

Latent Profile Analysis

E-learning

Longitudinal analysis

ABSTRACT

Despite the widespread use of e-learning in higher education, little is known about the motivational orientations of learners who are required to use it. The current research explores the role of amotivation within the compulsory e-learning component of a blended learning course at one Japanese university. The investigation takes the form of three connected studies. In Study-I, the Academic Amotivation Inventory (AAI) was adapted to measure motivation for e-learning. In Study-II the adapted AAI was administered to students twice, five months apart ($n = 440$). Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) was undertaken with lagged data points to test for latent groups and the stability of amotivational profiles across time. LPA indicated two latent groups: one clearly amotivated by the e-learning program and one “not amotivated”. Longitudinal results indicated that the size of the two groups remained roughly consistent across the duration of the study. While the amotivational profile of the “not amotivated” group remained constant longitudinally, the amotivated group profile changed substantially. Students reported two key reasons for not engaging in their e-learning studies: low task value and poor ability beliefs. In Study-III, interviews with 12 students were undertaken to add depth to the quantitative results. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The use of digital technologies in language education (hereafter referred to as “e-learning”) has undergone rapid development over its fifty-year history. Since its beginnings in behavioristic drill-and-practice software in the 1960s, e-learning has developed into highly sophisticated online applications that incorporate student-centered, socio-cognitive learning theories (Bax, 2003; Warschauer, 1996; Warschauer & Liaw, 2010).

While considerable hopes have been attached to e-learning, autonomous e-learning use has been found to result in high non-participation and attrition rates when the required human support is lacking, particularly for novice learners (Nielson, 2011). Substantial motivational problems persist with any form of independent study, regardless of whether it is traditional pen-and-paper homework or e-learning. Such problems are endemic to compulsory education in which students must take certain courses in order to fulfill departmental or institutional requirements, and are exacerbated when institution-mandated instructional frameworks fail to provide adequate support for effective education. These issues are addressed within the literature review.

Following a review of the literature, three connected studies are presented: Study-I quantitatively explores the nature of amotivation within an e-learning context, Study-II examines the longitudinal change in amotivation profiles of students across a five-month gap, and Study-III qualitatively examines students' reasons for not wanting to study online.

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2. Literature review

2.1. E-learning in compulsory Japanese higher education

Faculty in Japanese higher education, as in the West, must often contend with low motivation to study and institution-wide curricular frameworks that are unfavorable for classroom-based language learning. Poor scheduling is a common problem. Effective language learning depends on frequent exposure to the target language; high intensity of exposure to the second language is conducive to the proceduralization of declarative knowledge and its subsequent automatization (DeKeyser, 2007, pp. 215–217). Not surprisingly, foreign language classes that are more closely spaced are more effective than those separated by large intervals (Serrano, 2011). E-learning, when combined with more traditional forms of independent study in a blended format, can effectively decrease intervals between study sessions and increase the total amount of time a student spends studying English over the week when compared with typical compulsory English courses.

Some 80% of higher education institutions across Japan have adopted a single commercial e-learning package, *ALC NetAcademy*, in an attempt to achieve this goal (ALC, 2011). Such initiatives have been met with limited success, due to not only lack of integration with the core curricula, but also lack of accountability. E-learning and classroom learning should ideally be tightly integrated in a blended approach, and student progress should be tracked via a learning management system. E-learning integrated into a curriculum-wide blended learning format ensures that students are engaged in studying the prescribed content for, at a minimum, a certain amount of time every week.

Compulsory education is based on the premise that students lack autonomy in the selection of their courses. This forced nature of compulsory education places students, particularly those who attribute incompetence at English to a long history of failure in secondary schooling, at a severe motivational disadvantage even before setting foot in their first class. Investigating students' reasons for not wanting to engage in e-learning makes it possible to identify at-risk students whose flagging motivation requires special attention, and to address the underlying issues that gave rise to their motivational orientations. These issues might then be addressed via face-to-face intervention and manipulation of the e-learning itself.

E-learning that further reduces student motivation to study is less likely to be effective in the long term (Chen & Jang, 2010; Lim, 2004). We therefore feel the reasons for students' potential disengagement with e-learning deserve serious consideration, especially in compulsory educational contexts in which initial student motivation to learn the subject matter may be low.

2.2. The research context through the lens of Self-Determination Theory

The current research is carried out within the theoretical framework described by Self-Determination Theory and its mini theories (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). SDT describes an individual's motivation as being dependent on the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The research context is a compulsory 20-week blended e-learning program that forms part of a year-long compulsory English course. The vast majority of students participating in the English program are of low English proficiency. The e-learning program, in addition to being compulsory, currently offers no opportunities for social interaction with other students. It therefore appears reasonable to assume that the students' basic psychological needs – autonomy and relatedness needs in particular – may not be satisfied adequately in the current environment. According to Organismic Integration Theory, the quality of student motivation may decrease in such contexts. In a worst-case scenario, students may lose their motivation altogether, resulting in a shift into the domain of amotivation within the SDT framework.

Our choice to measure amotivation is predicated on a concern cited by many teachers in the current research context that despite the compulsory nature of the e-learning assignments, students are often not motivated to complete them. In fact, at the end of each academic semester, the number of non-completes for assigned e-learning has raised doubts about its use as a tool for increasing study time. The issue is particularly relevant for e-learning, like the system used in the current study, that allows for cognitive presence, but lacks affordances for teaching and social presence. Swain, Garrison, and Richardson (2009) argue that the integration of all three elements is crucial for a high-quality, community-based educational experience. When compared to distance learning and other e-learning contexts that lack a physical classroom, teaching presence and social presence are more readily leveraged in a blended format due to classroom interactions that are unmediated by technology. However, the fact remains that e-learning itself is either a solitary activity or an activity in which social interactions are fundamentally altered from those in the classroom. Because amotivated students are likely to be less receptive to new instructional modalities, and because the proliferation of e-learning is bound to continue unabated in the future, the nature of student amotivation in regards to e-learning is an important topic for a wide range of subjects and educational contexts. It is particularly important for compulsory subjects, not only because they involve more amotivated students, but also because, at the university level, they typically involve a larger number of students. It seems likely that an increasing number of universities will turn to e-learning in the future to support the education of such groups of students in a cost-effective manner.

Finally, the current research is not primarily concerned with non-completes or even low motivation, but the disengagement it may be causing. As the saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but..."

2.3. Amotivation

Amotivation is perhaps the least researched aspect of the Organismic Integration Theory continuum of motivation. It is defined most explicitly as a dysregulation: a disconnect between behavior and outcome. This lack of regulation is hypothesized as chiefly being the result of poor ability beliefs and low valuation in regards to a particular task.

Although everyone experiences amotivation at some point in their life, and it is not difficult to recognize in others, the study of why someone is not motivated seems to be less interesting than why someone is motivated. This is unfortunate, as the conditions that cause individuals to lose motivation are, in many ways, far more interesting and practical as topics of investigation. Human beings are naturally motivated to learn. Educational research, however, has repeatedly demonstrated that motivation decreases as students progress through formal education (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Harter, 1981). Few researchers have sought to understand the nature and effect of amotivation as a distinct construct, despite this being a crucial issue facing formal education internationally. Understanding the

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