



Peer review process completion rates and subsequent student perceptions within completely online versus blended modes of study



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ABSTRACT

Integration of technology into many areas of the language learning classroom is increasingly becoming a reality, and peer review of student writing is one area in particular which has shown to benefit from these technology enhancements. This study explored the ability of students to autonomously complete a suite of technology enhanced (TE) training, practice and actual asynchronous peer review activities using only a learning management system (LMS). In addition, the study gauged differences in student perceptions and attitudes when undertaking this process in a completely online versus blended mode of study. Results suggest students can successfully carry out TE training, practice and asynchronous peer review activities autonomously through an LMS completely online, but they exhibit more favorable attitudes and motivation when this process is conducted in a blended mode within a computer laboratory.

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1. Introduction

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) can be interpreted differently but generally includes some form of web based, web assisted or technology enhanced content (Blake, 2011; Cowie & Sakui, 2013; Dudeney & Hockly, 2012; Kop, 2011; White, 2006). While this type of content was traditionally accessed through institutional facilities such as computer laboratories, the ubiquity of technology has now made it more likely that this form of learning takes place autonomously through students own personal devices away from institutions (Steel & Levy, 2013). This shift offers the potential to offer online language programs and activities outside the physical classroom, in isolation from other students (Blake, 2011). The terms and exact format for online language learning are vague however, as the majority of teaching and language programs these days have technologically enhanced and offline learning support available to students. Rather than being completely online, this form of blended learning with a mix of technology and non-technology elements can be considered on a continuum as being either more or less technology supported (Blake, 2011; Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012; White, 2006).

Peer review of student writing is one form of activity which technology has been particularly useful in supporting (Chang, 2012; Figl, Bauer, & Mangler, 2006). Word processing software and real time communication technology has allowed students to review, comment and give feedback on others work without the need to be in the same physical location. However, studies have also shown that peer review, along with other technology enhanced (TE) language learning activities, requires adequate training and support in order to be successful (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Liou & Peng, 2009).

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Despite the need for training in support of peer review, few studies have reported on how this may also be carried out in an online manner. In addition, other than the studies explored below, few have gauged student perceptions in carrying out the same activity in a completely autonomous manner (online) against approaches blending technology into more conventional classroom contexts such as within computer laboratories. The objectives of the current study were therefore to determine whether training, practice and online peer review could all be successfully carried out by students autonomously through a learning management system (LMS), and how students would perceive these activities in a completely online mode compared to a blended mode in a computer laboratory. This type of research is needed in order to guide pedagogically sound implementation of technology within the language classroom and beyond.

2. Literature review

2.1. Technology enhanced and blended language learning at the program and activity level

Advances in technology for language programs have resulted in a plethora of developments at both the program and activity level. At the program level, distance or online learning programs have become more widely offered (White, 2006). For example, Hurd, Beaven, and Ortega (2001) detail several diploma level language programs through the Open University in the UK. These programs are administered completely online, encouraging participation from students whose circumstances necessitate an alternative to traditional language classes, and the learning outcomes and success of these types of programs appear comparable to, but not better than traditional forms of language classes (Chenoweth & Murday, 2013; Chenoweth, Ushida, & Murday, 2013).

Murday, Ushida, and Chenoweth (2008) also outline a blended course approach. In this format, students cover all content, some testing, and communication practice online, in addition to physically meeting with other students for one hour a week, and alone with their instructor for a shorter period. Results from Murday et al. (2008) indicated more overall satisfaction with the program among the blended course students than among those in the conventional language classes. These findings are similar in other studies on blended language programs as students appreciate the flexibility and autonomy that the format offers (Goertler, 2012; Larsen, 2012).

At the activity level also, recent progress in technology has allowed blending with or replacement of more conventional activities or tasks. Levy (2009) details how technology can assist most areas of language development, including all four skill areas as well as intercultural understanding.

2.2. Student perceptions and effectiveness of technology in language learning

In both peer review and other activities, students attitudes are generally favorable towards TE activities due to the convenience and language learning opportunities (Qian & McCormick, 2012; Sagarra & Zapata, 2008), and Bax (2003) suggests a major goal of CALL should be to normalize technology to merge seamlessly with lessons. TE language learning benefits include repetition of language use, feedback opportunities from interlocutors, community of practice opportunities (Blake, 2011) and collaboration (Cox, Carr, & Hall, 2004). In a meta-analysis of 37 studies, Grgurović, Chapelle, and Shelley (2013) found that activities incorporating technology were generally more effective than conventional activities. The effect size for the difference however was mostly small. Benefits of technology in language learning can also occur outside the curriculum as students become more autonomous by taking charge of their learning through the technological tools which are available to them both inside and outside the classroom (Steel & Levy, 2013). These benefits suggest teachers need to be both technologically aware and adaptive of their teaching practices to incorporate TE approaches. Their approach however needs also to be guided by the detrimental effects that can sometimes occur.

2.3. Challenges for technology enhanced activities

Despite benefits, there are still problematic areas within TE programs and activities. At the course level, challenges remain in how to incorporate technology in pedagogically beneficial ways (Goertler, 2012; Wang, 2013), and the efficacy of TE activities is often dependent on group dynamics (Cox et al., 2004) or student motivation (Chenoweth & Murday, 2013; Ushida, 2005). More importantly, there are often discrepancies in teacher and student beliefs, and overestimation of student abilities to successfully incorporate TE language learning. For example, Wiebe and Kabata (2010) discovered wide discrepancies between instructor and student beliefs on effectiveness and purpose for using technology in language teaching. These differences in necessary beliefs and prerequisite student skills for successful incorporation of technology are explored below.

2.4. Student beliefs and requirements for successful technology integration

Motivation for study and sociocultural expectations can influence the successful implementation of TE language learning (Yang & Chen, 2007). For example, a study from Zhang and Cui (2010) found student inability to deal with adjusting teacher and student role expectations when moving from conventional to online class formats, and White (1999) details how beliefs are malleable over the period of a distance learning program. If student and teacher beliefs and role expectations are not aligned, and students are unwilling to adjust, it seems that effective TE activity implementation may be difficult. One

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