The Effectiveness of Blended Learning in Teaching Arabic as a Second Language

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Abstract: *A study was carried out comparing the effectiveness of blended learning strategies with traditional classroom-based approaches in learning Arabic as a second language at the Islamic University in Madinah. Two classes were selected using case study methodology and a total of 62 participants were involved in the study. Questionnaires and quizzes were used to collect data over a five week period, and were presented in English as this was the native language for most of the participants. Results indicate that there is a difference in the learning outcomes and that using a blended learning approach is a more effective way of imparting knowledge. Teachers should therefore be aware that blended learning strategies can enhance their teaching.*

Keywords: *online learning, Arabic, effective teaching strategies, better learning outcomes*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is much debate on the benefits or otherwise of online learning, as opposed to classroom-based learning. Indeed Groves and O'Donoghue [1] affirm that the use of technology enhances the quality of learning. A meta-analysis of research literature found that on average online learners performed slightly better than those receiving face-to-face instruction, although there is no substantive evidence that online learning is a superior approach [2]. More research should be conducted into this, as variables may have an impact on findings; one of these variables is foreign language learning. This study has therefore been carried out on online Arabic as second language learners in Saudi Arabia, to provide more understanding of language teaching and learning experiences.

The Islamic University in Madinah is considered an ambitious university, which focuses on providing solutions for learning Arabic language. As part of the Saudi national e-learning plan and expansion of distance education, Arabic as a second language courses have begun to adopt internet technology to support students' learning. All students enrolled in Arabic language courses at the Islamic University in Madinah are international students. The Islamic University in Madinah was founded by the government of Saudi Arabia in 1961 by a royal decree and is a modern university specialising in Islamic subjects. Approximately 80% of the 6,000 enrolled students are international students; consequently the university is culturally diverse and boasts enrolments from almost all nationalities around the world. This paper considers the performance of Arabic language students at the Islamic University in Madinah when comparing a traditional, wholly face-to-face learning experience with learning supported by technology.

2. AIMS AND METHODS

This study involved students enrolled in Arabic as a second language course at level 1. The performance of students was recorded, and a comparison was made between students in a traditional learning environment and those in a blended learning environment. *Traditional learning* refers to classroom-based, face to face learning. *Blended learning* involves a mix of both traditional learning and internet-based learning. The difference in performance between the two learning strategies (that is, traditional learning and blended learning) was attributed to the role of the e-learning website that was incorporated into the blended learning experience.

The aim of the investigation was concerned with determining the extent to which an e-learning website can be employed for students studying Arabic as a second language at the Islamic University

in Madinah, in order to them to be able to achieve the learning and teaching objectives of the Arabic language course. In order to answer this question, an experimental setup was constructed in which the traditional method of teaching Arabic as a second language and the blended learning method using an e-learning website were administered to two groups of students, using a case study methodology. Each group of students comprised 31 learners, totalling 62 participants. One group of students was exposed to the traditional method first, while the other was exposed to the blended learning method first. Both of the groups were provided with identical pre-tests prior to the delivery of the lesson and post-tests following the delivery of the lesson. This was conducted for ten lessons over a 5-week period and the results of the tests were analysed for normality and homogeneity.

During the first week a pre-test questionnaire was completed by each of the 62 participants. All the questions were closed questions and were presented in the English language as the majority of students were native English speakers. Questions were mainly related to demographics. The post-test questionnaire was administered at the end of a two week period of either blended learning or classroom learning. Questions were again closed and were based on issues identified in existing literature (Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh, 2002; Berge and Myers, 2000; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Curran, 2002; Graham et al., 2000; Mitchell et al., 2001; Schutte, 1996; Stacey and Rice, 2002); these questions required participants to respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very satisfied to not satisfied, and on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. At the start of their first week of each method of instruction an Arabic language quiz was administered and this was repeated at the end of the two week period, in order to assess changes in their Arabic language ability. These quizzes were developed to reflect the structure and level of difficulty of tests previously used in the course and required a mixture of open and closed responses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All sets of results were found to be sufficiently distributed and homogenous in order for parametric statistical testing to be conducted. Based on the results of these parametric tests on the pre-tests and post-tests, it was found that while the two groups scored similarly on each of the two pre-tests that were conducted, their average scores differed significantly on each of the two post-tests that were conducted. In each case, the blended learning group for a particular lesson scored higher than the traditional learning group for that lesson. These results mean that the students from the two groups were equally knowledgeable about each of the two sets of Arabic as a second language lessons that were to be taught prior to the delivery of their respective learning interventions. However, after delivery of the learning interventions, those who were taught using the blended learning strategy emerged as being more knowledgeable than those who were taught using the traditional learning strategy. This was true regardless of the group where the learning strategies were administered. That is, when the blended learning strategy was administered to one group, that group excelled in their lessons over the other group, but when the interventions were reversed and the other group was provided with the blended learning intervention, then that group was found superior to the first group. As such, since it was shown that the blended learning strategy enabled students to achieve greater learning outcomes than the traditional learning strategy, it is concluded that the use of an e-learning website, as utilised in the blended learning strategy, can be employed as an effective means for students studying Arabic as a second language to achieve the learning objectives of the Arabic language course. These outcomes are consistent with those from various recent studies on the effectiveness of blended learning for teaching other second languages such as English (Grgurovic, 2011; Hinkelman & Gruba, 2012) or Spanish (Pellerin & Montes, 2012), as well as one dissertation that focused specifically on teaching Arabic as a second language in Egypt (Essam, 2010). These studies likewise supported the effectiveness of the blended learning strategy for second language learning based on pre- and post-test comparisons of students who undertook blended learning programmes, as well as comparisons between the changes in second language competence of students who undertook blended learning and students who undertook traditional second language learning.

This study also sought to determine the extent to which the blended learning strategy enabled the students studying Arabic as a second language to employ different learning strategies to achieve the learning and teaching objectives of the Arabic language course. Informal interviews with the students were conducted on their experiences with both traditional learning and blended learning strategies in the Arabic course. The outcomes of these interviews provided various insights on the diversity of learning strategies that students were able to employ in each approach. Firstly, it was found that the

blended learning strategy enabled students to hear words in Arabic more than once and learn how to pronounce the letters clearly. This is because the students can review the online lessons and go back to specific instances when a word was uttered by the teacher. This could not be done in the traditional classroom, since it was not recorded, and the students feared that they would be reprimanded by their teacher for not paying attention should they repeatedly ask for clarification. This strategy appealed to auditory learners who are more inclined to learn content when it is repeatedly heard. Secondly, it was found that the blended learning strategy enabled the students to collaborate more effectively with one another than in the traditional learning strategy. Specifically, the online discussion feature of the e-learning website that was used made it possible for the students to communicate with one another, either through real-time chat or non-real time message board. The students also commented that they were able to access more illustrations of the lesson on the internet than in the book. In traditional settings, the book and the teacher's visual aids are the students' only sources of visual stimuli for the lesson. This can be very limited, which makes it difficult for students to develop an accurate picture of the word or situation being described in the lesson. Use of the internet solved this problem because a simple search in a search engine can reveal thousands of pictures related to the relevant lesson. From the available illustrations, the students could also see the different contexts in which different phrases and words are used. This method appealed to visual learners, who are able to learn best when they see illustrations that they can associate with learning content.

Another positive comment made by the students about the blended learning strategy when compared with their experiences of traditional learning was that the electronic translation feature added to the e-learning website helped them to learn the new words that they studied, especially when there was a lack of translation to Arabic. In traditional classes, most of the students who speak English carry pocket dictionaries to help them during classes. However, many find the use of these inconvenient, and have difficulty in searching for the words they use. Also, the dictionaries are usually incomplete, making it futile at times to search for a specific word. While the traditional setting also allowed students to make use of electronic, handheld dictionaries, students commented that these devices were often expensive and not always practical. There is little sense in buying an electronic dictionary when they can be found and used online for free. The e-learning website allowed students to compare the definition presented in the e-learning site with other definitions from other sources, and see how the word could be used in different situations. This showed that the blended learning strategy also appealed to students who were intrapersonal learners. These are learners who prefer to learn on their own, and utilise resources that are immediately available to them in order to understand learning content. The blended learning strategy made it possible for these students to access resources that would have otherwise been too complex or impractical.

The blended learning strategy was also found to be a suitable strategy for developing diverse literacy skills of the students. Not only was the strategy able to successfully teach the students how to read and understand Arabic, it was also able to help them develop effective writing skills. As explained in many of the interviews conducted, the students had limited computer skills when they started out on the course. Needing to access and process learning content online required them to learn more extensive computer skills, particularly working with word processing software. Since using e-learning meant spending more time online, the students got more practice using the computer, and this advanced their ability to use the computer for their writing. They reported that they were now more confident about their writing skills, and that they were also more aware of the different features that using a computer for writing has to make the activity easier. Furthermore, the students discussed that the e-learning website also made it possible for them to use the internet more in developing the papers that they were required to write for their studies. These papers usually required them to conduct research. Prior to undertaking the course through the e-learning website, the students had difficulty researching information from traditional sources. Through exposure to the internet, the students were made aware of the internet as a source of boundless information. They were able to surf the web and gather considerable amounts of information, which they were then able to utilise in their writing. Some of the students explained that they did not think they would have made as much progress in a traditional classroom, since conducting research in such settings was considered to be difficult and boring. From their experience with the e-learning website, the students felt more comfortable in developing their writing through research, since the content was so easily available.

4. CONCLUSION

Overall, students found that their experiences with the blended learning strategy made them more independent and allowed them to explore learning content in multiple ways, instead of relying on the instructor completely for direction on how to go about learning the lesson. This is consistent with the results of interviews conducted by Yang (2012) on college students with second language difficulties who were prescribed blended learning activities. Based on these outputs, it is evident that the blended learning strategy did stimulate the use of diverse learning strategies that cater to different types of learners. As such, it can be concluded that the Arabic e-learning website used in the blended learning strategy extensively enabled students to employ diverse learning strategies to achieve the learning and teaching objectives of the Arabic language course.

One of the extra benefits of this study was that it allowed students to share the experiences of their peers within the e-learning website. Many of these students may not have experienced e-learning systems in learning Arabic as a second language, and may have been experiencing difficulties learning a second language. This study showed these students that the e-learning website could assist in learning Arabic as a second language, and give them confidence in their progress.

For teachers of Arabic as a second language, the outcomes of this study can be used to raise awareness of the importance of internet technology for current and future students. Many of these teachers may not yet be adequately trained in the application of e-learning websites and may require considerable training. This study has shown that there is sufficient reason for teachers in this field to undertake such training and become more familiar with e-learning as this would improve their competence and help their students achieve the desired learning outcomes. This study shows them that the use of the internet can make learning more enjoyable and effective for students, as well as motivate them to meet the course learning objectives. Specifically, the internet allows teachers to provide more opportunities for students to interact with diverse lesson content and to give students greater flexibility over learning activities.

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