

Students' Insights and Experiences of Web-Based Learning Support ; The Case of Second Year Students of the University of Batna- Algeria

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Abstract

With the help of the innovations in technology, the use of web-based learning level has become a major strategy for improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes at the university level. This study explored how university students perceived and experienced web-based learning support designed for an English course. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used in the study .Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with the students enrolled in the “Oral Expression” course. Through intensity sampling strategy , out of 526 students, enrolled in the system, six were selected for the study. The findings showed that students perceived web-based learning useful and their experiences with it were mostly positive.

Keywords: Self-directed learning, Web-based learning support.

Introduction

With the help of the innovations in technology, the use of Web-based learning level has become a major strategy for improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes at the university level. Web-based learning environments have various advantages when compared to traditional face-to-face learning. First of all, it provides self-regulated learning and autonomy. As Stevens and Switzer (2006) state, it provides a better opportunity for students to foster their autonomy. In addition, the students are more autonomous and less dependent on teacher's approval and instruction.

There are various ways of using web support for instruction, and research is crucial to test and compare them for their effectiveness and impact on student learning. Studies focus on effective use of web based learning environment, students perspective, and its application on different areas. There also studies on the effect of web-based learning environment on success and motivation of students along with studies on web-based learning as self-directed learning.

Thomas (2008) studied the effective use of web-based learning environment. They tested the students' level of anxiety and evaluated their performance. They found that the students were not anxious about the use of technology as they got used to in their real life. Also, they found that the use of web-based learning environments affected the success of students in a positive way.

About the students' perspectives, Sweeney O'Donoghue and Whitehead (2004), in their studies used a qualitative research design undertaken at one Australian University through in depth interviews. In the study, the roles of the tutors, the students themselves and the peers in face to face and web-based tutorials are explained. It is concluded in the study that students had an active role in their own learning in web-based learning tutorials. Also, the students did not favor one tutorial types to the other, they wanted the correct balance between both strategies.

Furthermore, Gómez and Duart (2011) studied a hybrid postgraduate program in a university in Colombia and concluded that students had a very positive opinion of the subjects and the educational model in the program. Similarly, Tselios, Daskalakis, and Papadopoulou, (2011) investigated Greek students' views toward blended learning. The findings obtained showed that both perceived usefulness and simplicity of use have a positive impact on attitude toward using a combination of online and face-to-face instruction in the university.

Chang (2005) studied the motivational perceptions on applying the self-regulated learning strategies in the web-based instruction. In this study, Chang gave a questionnaire to the students who took a web-based course to measure their motivational orientations. He found out that web-based instruction motivated the students in their self-regulated learning strategies and self-evaluation. They were intrinsically motivated and became responsible for their own learning strategies.

Moreover, Dabbagh (2006) in his article entitled as "Self-regulations and Web Based Pedagogical Tools" gives suggestions on how college instructors can use web-based pedagogical tools to promote students' self-regulation. He thinks that instructors can help students in setting

their own goals , self-monitor themselves and self-evaluate their own learning process by using web-based pedagogical tools and in that way their level of achievement may be higher.

As it can be seen from the literature , there are studies on the influence of web-based learning environment on students' achievement and attitude. Most of these studies are quantitative and attempt to establish relations among variables in relation to web-based instructions. However, an in depth understanding of students' experiences and the meaning of these experiences seem to be missing in the literature. Therefore this study will investigate university students' experiences and opinions through interviews in terms of how they adapt to the use of web-based instruction and use it to be more successful in the course. The web-based support for teaching English has been experimented at Batna University for integrating the use of technology to the students' self-studies and to provide variety in the learning environment . For that reason, its assessment based on the approaches in the literature is significant to draw lesson on the implementation of web-based learning support at universities.

Research Design and Methodology

In this study , a qualitative phenomenological research design was used. One of the main aims of qualitative research is providing better understanding to human behavior and experiences and it emphasizes the conceptions of the subjects on the related phenomena (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). For that reason, the concept of web-based learning was studied based on qualitative phenomenological research design to attempt exploring the perspectives of the students on web-based learning support . Within this perspective , the research questions included:

- 1- What is the meaning of web-based learning support (WBLS) for the university students ?
- 2- How do university students experience web-based learning support ?
- 3- What are the strategies that university students adapt in use of web-based learning support ?
- 4- What is the contribution that web-based learning support makes in university students' learning experiences ?

Context

The study was conducted in the Department of Foreign Languages at Batna University. The students of "Introduction to Communication Skills in English" course used the web page of their course books as the web based learning support. The main aim of the course is to help students improve their overall proficiency in the English language which will enable them to follow their departmental courses with ease. For that reason, this course attempts to develop students' four skills of English as reading , writing, listening and speaking.

To this end , two course books and a supplementary pack was used in 2011-2012 Fall Term. One of the course books was used to develop reading and writing skills , and the other one was used to develop listening and speaking skills of the students. These course books have a web page which tries to support the self-study of the students. 5% points is allocated to web based learning studies as for the assessment part of the course to encourage the students to use the support in their self-studies.

To be able to use the support, the students are given an access code attached to their course books and asked to register. Then, with the login name and password they determine, they are able to open the web page and do the activities organized according to the units. Each unit has the reading texts stated in the course book, reading practices, vocabulary development activities, presentation and practice activities in grammar and writing, listening and pronunciation activities, video activities integrated activities, games, puzzles and achievement tests. Also, students may communicate with their instructors and friends asynchronously. There are computer labs at the university for students' use, but students generally prefer doing the activities at home.

Participants

The students who participated in the study were chosen through purposive sampling strategy as a basis of qualitative research design to select information rich cases (Patton, 1990). For that reason, intensity sampling strategy was used to determine the subjects as they provide intense information about their experiences of using the web based learning support. To this end, data was gathered from the students enrolled in "Introduction to Communication Skills in English" course offered by the Department of Foreign Languages at Batna University. Out of 630 students, enrolled in the system, six students who use the support the most were chosen. These students were selected through intensity sampling because they are expected to have more experience with the web-based instruction system.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews "uncover the participants' views" about "how the participants frames and structures" a phenomenon (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p.101). The interviews took half an hour and there were two parts as background questions about the participants, and content and process of web based learning support. The questions about the content and process of web based learning support covered the areas of the frequency and the reasons of the use, the favorite types of activities and the difficult ones, the problems they encountered, the solutions they found, the feelings and expectations of the users on the support, the kind of learning strategies they adopted and the differences between face to face learning and web-based learning support.

To reach the relevant sample, first, the students who used the web-based support most were determined. Then, appointments were made for the interviews. The interviews were tape recorded with permission of the participants. They took about 25 minutes. Notes were also taken during the interviews to support the recorded data.

Data analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the data. Content analysis involves reaching in the concepts and themes that will explain the data collected. In content analysis, data is collected and the realities that are included in data are tried to be explored (Lamy & Hampel 2007, p. 277). In line with this process, the data in this study were read closely to identify the meaningful units based on the research questions and the descriptive codes such as "retention", "flexibility of time" and "controlling achievement" were

assigned to these units. Later, the descriptive codes were grouped into categories such as “use of technology”, “support for learning”, student-centered learning experiences” and “anticipations”. Then, the categories formed the themes like “meaning of web-based learning support” and learning strategies “.

Results

The data analysis produced four themes: conception of web-based learning support, use of web-based learning support, learning strategies and contribution to learning.

Conception of Web-based learning support

The conception of web-based learning support involved six meanings. The first meaning was attached to “the use of technology”. The students accepted web based learning as an important source for their learning. They thought that the activities on the web-page were supportive especially in studying English. With the help of the exercises , they practiced especially their vocabulary , listening, and reading skills. Also, this support meant the consolidation of the units in their course books. As it was the collection of resources and included variety of activities, the students thought that they practiced the units that they covered in they covered in their course books and especially the trial and error techniques were helpful for them in retention of the topics. Also this support was seen a tutorial for the students. In addition, the students stated that it was suitable for different learning styles and they found this useful.

Web-based learning was also perceived as an exam support. The students perceived it as part of homework as they used it when the activities were assigned as homework. Moreover, they found it useful in their exam studies. The students stated that they controlled their achievement before the exams and in that way they could recognize the points they need to study.

Furthermore, web-based learning was recognized as a support for motivation. They stated that doing all the activities from the course book was sometimes boring. However, using the computer and the internet, and doing different types of activities provided higher motivation to the course.

Moreover, by doing the activities successfully and using a web-based support in the age of technology, they claimed that they gained higher level of self-confidence. In addition, as the activities were not so difficult and they could interact with their teacher and friends while doing them, they said they were highly motivated to do the activities.

The students referred to the support as student-centered learning experiences. They thought that web-based learning support provided self-efficacy and flexibility. They stated their own goals, they did the activities with their own strategies , they did the activities alone, in the time they liked, and in the place they wanted to study. Also, they controlled their own learning as they evaluated themselves. The students found this support helpful for individual development as they were active in their own learning process.

Before starting to use this support, they had some anticipation. They thought they were curious about it, they recognized this support as a waste of time. Also, they were concerned about making mistakes. They thought that they would have just one attempt to do the activities and then they would not be able to try it once more. However, after using the support, they

changed their time and as they had the chance of doing the activities repeatedly, they thought they were learning.

Experiences of Web-Based Learning Support

Students' experiences of web-based learning support can be recognized around seven concepts. It was found that while using the web-based learning support, the students preferred to use supportive materials such as the course book and dictionary. Also, the students generally used the support when the activities were assigned as homework and before the exams as an exam support.

The activities that the students liked to use through web-based learning were grammar, vocabulary, reading and pronunciation activities. Also, some of them preferred the activities which they called "difficult". There were academic and motivational reasons for this. For the academic reasons, they thought that these activities showed them how to use the new vocabulary correctly. Also, with the help of drill and practice, they found it easy to learn and recall the new words. In addition, the usefulness of the model sentences especially in grammar and vocabulary activities were stated as the reasons for doing these activities, And for the motivational reasons, the students found these activities interesting and easy. Also, as they did fewer mistakes, they had higher grades, and this provided self-confidence for them.

On the other hand, the activities that they found difficult were stated as listening, writing, and pronunciation and puzzle activities. As for the academic reasons, it was found that the students had comprehension problems in listening activities. They found the level of the listening activities higher and the rate of the speaking fast. Although some of the students stated it as the best activity, pronunciation activity was found difficult too, because of the difficulty that the students had in speaking. Moreover, as for the motivational reasons, these activities, especially puzzle, were found time consuming and not interesting by the students. Also, as the writing activities, the students' level of English, failure in the activities and their belief of the activities' being difficult were the reasons of difficult activities.

Finally, the students generally did not have important problems in experiencing the support, but they found the connection to the web site and the submission process of the activities too long. Also, they found the level of listening activities above their levels.

Learning Strategies

Students adapted some learning strategies to use web-based learning support. These were mostly related to self-directed learning strategies. While doing the activities, they felt that there was a teacher observing them, so they did the activities carefully. They preferred taking notes of the things that they wanted to remember. Also, they started from doing the topics that they were more familiar, and then, they did the less familiar ones. In that way, they felt more self-confidence. Moreover, the students focused on the importance of self-directed learning. They said that, as they were flexible in terms of time and place, they organized their own learning. Also, when they did mistakes, they tried it again and again and by developing their own strategies they thought that they learnt.

Finally, students used other materials to get support while doing the activities. They used their course books to remember the units or dictionaries to find the meanings of the new words. They sometimes used e-dictionary or the electronic version of the course book.

Contribution to Learning

Web-based learning support contributed to students' learning . The students recognized the contribution especially in terms of vocabulary learning. With the help of vocabulary activities , they practiced the new vocabulary and that drill and practice activities were helpful in recalling the vocabulary. In that way, the activities contributed to their exams studies .

Moreover, web-based learning support contributed to students' motivation. As they were using technology and multimedia, they liked the course more, they did not get bored of doing the same kind of activities and this provided higher level of motivation. Also, as they could easily recognize their success in doing the activities , they saw the activities as reinforcement to their learning. By seeing that they could do the activities, they also gain self-confidence.

Finally, flexibility of learning was seen as a contribution. The students thought that the topics that they should study were presented on the web-page as a summary and they felt the convenience of time and place in addition to the variety of resources. In that way, they learnt according to their individual needs and this supports their learning.

Conclusion

In the light of the findings , it can be concluded that university students had positive perceptions about web-based learning support. They use the web-based learning environment as a support for their learning process, exams and motivation for face to face learning environment . Through web-based learning support, they develop self-directed learning strategies.

However, one of the most effective reasons of the students' using web-based learning support is its being one of the course requirements, and they also generally prefer to do the activities that are assigned. For that reason, teachers using this program as a support should focus on the explanation of the benefits of using this support, and the activities to which will be assigned should be chosen carefully knowing that the students may only do the assigned ones.

In order to create effective learning environments, teachers may benefit from the attractiveness of web- based learning materials for students. They provide various activities suitable for different learning styles. In addition, with the help of web based learning environments, students shape their own learning by deciding what to learn , when to learn , where to learn and how to learn.

For this reason, there is a need for continuous research on this area with the growing innovation in technology and learning theories to see how effective web based environment can be used in different areas. In that way, teachers may benefit from the research on how to use web-based learning materials effectively.

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Dr. Amel Bahloul has been a teacher at the University of Batna (Ageria) , Department of English since 1998. She got her Doctorate degree in 2008. She is specialised in theoretical and applied linguistics. Her main interest is investigating new ways to teach students the skills they need . To understand Foreign language acquisition and promote change at the university level .

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