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Towards sustainable language learning in higher education – engagement through multimodal approaches

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Abstract. This project was conducted in a five credit course in English as a Foreign Language, which was a compulsory module in first year business administration studies. The data includes students' learning diaries and a post-course online questionnaire (N=21). The data were analysed using a content analysis method. The results indicate that the students perceived the multimodal task design as enjoyable and students' engagement was fostered by course design, teacher's activity, student's activity, and collaboration.

Keywords: multimodality, language learning, student engagement, higher education, blended learning.

1. Introduction

This study investigates how a multimodal approach affects student engagement in a first year business administration English course. As higher education institutes offer online and blended learning courses, they attract an increasing number of non-traditional students, often professionals who combine working life with studying. Online courses cater to this student type by offering flexible study options (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010). Although online-learning provides flexibility for students, balancing between studies and external commitments can cause stress and scheduling issues which can lead to a higher rate of interrupted or even dropped studies.

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Technologies that afford multimodal communication enhance interaction. Multimodality defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) is "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined" (p. 20). Students should get opportunities to engage with complex communicative models to understand that communication is layered action and that different modes complement or reiterate each other to convey social action (Jewitt, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Multimodal online environments encourage collaboration (Leier & Korkealehto, 2018), which leads to agency. *Agency* is defined by Chik (2014) and van Lier (2004, 2007) as active learning where learners utilise resources in the environment to advance their competence based on individual requirements. *Agency* can be developed by interaction and self-reflection, which the virtual environment affords. Teacher and peer-support help to build agency in distance and face-to-face teaching. *Agency* is closely associated with *authenticity* (Chik, 2014; Gee, 2004), which refers not only to how the learner perceives the learning environment and how its resources can be harnessed, but also to how competence acquired in the learning context can be applied in real life situations (Chik, 2014; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This study investigates how students perceived a collaborative learning environment afforded by a multimodal course design. The study contributes to the discussion of communication using multimodality. Our research question is:

- What are the students' perceptions of factors to enhance student engagement in a blended[3] learning course?

2.   Method

This qualitative research study was conducted and data were collected in an English course in higher education in Finland. The participants were first year students (N=21) with heterogeneous educational backgrounds and their ages ranged from 20 to 51 years. Their level of English proficiency ranged from A2 to B1. The data includes sources as shown in Table 1.

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3. This study is a blend of five online sessions and five face-to-face meetings over a period of 16 weeks.

Table 1. Data collection

Source	Participants	Method	Words
Questionnaire	21 students	Content analysis	2,017
Diaries	21 students	Content analysis	31,077

The reflective learning diaries included weekly entries with a length between 335 to 2,626 words, an average learning diary comprised of 1,700 words. The diaries were sent to the teacher after completing the course. Student reflections over a period of time help the teacher to get a better understanding of how the students' perceived the tasks.

3. Course design

The target was to support student engagement and oral interaction and therefore the course material and the assignments were carefully planned following a pedagogically sound model (Long, 1985; Swain, 1997) which was in line with the guidelines of the institution promoting field specific, context-aware language learning.

The duration of the course was 16 weeks with five face-to-face sessions and distance learning sessions. The students used various educational tools to conduct their assignments. A questionnaire was used to ask the students about the course design. The eight questions were open-ended and were accessible online. The data were analysed using content analysis (Schreier, 2012).

4. Findings

The study provided insights on students' perceptions of the blended learning course. The results show that the students' engagement was fostered by the following factors: course design, teacher's activity, student's activity, and collaboration. The students appreciated the clearly structured course design with information about the timetable, assignments, and tool instructions. The students enjoyed the assignments which were to be conducted utilising various educational technology tools:

"The tools were awesome, I utilised them in my other studies and work".

Furthermore, the students appreciated the course material which was authentic and supported their working life. Moreover, the students considered themselves

taking an active role in the course, they developed their own agency which in turn contributed to engagement:

> "I prepared myself by learning the new material and after that it was easy to conduct the weekly oral tasks via WhatsApp video call with my pair".

Further, the students stated that the feeling of progress and overcoming challenges had a positive impact on their engagement. In addition, the students appreciated the teacher's guidance, support, and personal feedback on distance and contact teaching periods:

> "I really liked the teacher's style, it was relaxed but consistent and engaging".

Further, the students regarded the weekly discussions with their assigned partners as beneficial for their engagement; they appreciated peer feedback and support. Weekly pair discussions were also utilised as a forum to discuss off-task issues:

> "Once again, my partner helped me with a difficult task, and we were able to have a proper conversation afterwards".

5. Discussion

This blended learning course was developed using technology-enhanced course material. The students were engaged both with the course material and with their classmates. The results show that the factor contributing to student engagement in this English course was the course design, which encouraged both the teacher and students to learn actively and collaboratively.

Course design using different technology is essential to cater for a partly online taught course. The applications were carefully chosen to support the course objectives. The multimodal course design (Hauck & Youngs, 2008), with its collaborative tasks, afforded interaction with peers and promoted agency, which resulted in engaged learning.

The students perceived themselves as active learners and regarded their own studying as contributing positively to engagement, which led to feelings of agency

as defined by Chik (2014); active learning where learners utilise resources in the environment to advance their competence based on individual requirements.

The authentic learning content with its multimodal activities was designed to relate to students' real life situations which enhanced engagement. The design provided a platform to perform genuine social interaction and collaboration, as Gee (2004) claims that agency and authenticity are closely related.

Students answered in the questionnaire that they regarded the teacher's availability and flexibility to solve issues and to provide support throughout the course as beneficial. It fostered students' engagement and coactions, and also helped to build a pleasant course atmosphere, which is essential for learning (Chik, 2014).

6.   Conclusions

This research study has implications for language learning in the tertiary sector since it reminds educators to utilise educational technology creatively and it encourages students to be creators instead of consumers of technology. Furthermore, the study urges teachers to design online courses to support oral language competence.

7.   Acknowledgements

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