Conversations with independent young adult online language learners

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This pilot study focuses on young adult learners who voluntarily enrolled for an online English language learning program. They were interviewed mid-way through their program. Preliminary findings indicate that they pursued lessons that suited their goals and their usage patterns, which depended on internal and external factors, varied.

Keywords: independent online language learner, adult/young adult learner

Introduction

English Discoveries Online (EDO) is an English Language Online Learning program that contains a plethora of online learning resources for beginner to advanced learners distributed over nine levels (EduSoft, n.d.). These resources allow learners to develop individual language skills through exploration, learning and practice at their own pace, and in a manner that suit their own learning styles, abilities and preferences. Integrated multi media such as text, sound, video, graphics and animation, are combined in a non-linear interactive way through hyper-linking. It allows numerous forms of interaction and collaboration such as email, instant messaging, chats, forums and notice boards (AuraTech, n.d.).

When EDO was offered as an optional six month self-development program to Engineering students in a polytechnic in Singapore in 2006, nine students voluntarily enrolled for it. As this was the first time they were embarking such a program as independent learners, it was not known how they would, as young adults, would adapt to this mode of learning. Hence, a pilot research project was conducted to find out how they were learning. The research question was "What was the learning experience of the users of English Discovery Online?" The conceptual framework is indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

The juxtaposition of the independent young adult language learner in the online learning medium resulted in the selection of these two constructs: online learning and adult learner.
Literature review

Online learning calls for an active approach to learning and learners are expected to be independent learners (Brooks, Nolan, & Gallagher, 2001; Dringus, 2000). Online learners learn by interacting online with non-humans (i.e., content) as well as humans, namely tutors and other students (Garrison & Anderson, 2002; Moore, 1989).

In planning programs for adult learners, it is essential to note the learners' need to know, the learners' self-concept, the role of the learners' experience, their readiness to learn, their orientation to learning, and learner motivation. The adult learners' readiness to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role. The focus is in the immediacy of application, hence adult learners are more problem-centered than subject centered in his learning. Adults are thus motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones (Knowles, 1980, 1984). New perspectives to andragogy include the

recognition of differences in personality, prior knowledge, different stages of learner autonomy, life span and cognitive development (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998).

Kasworm and Londener (2000) believe that when computing technology is used to teach adults, the curriculum should be designed to be dynamic, flexible and iterative, focused on the needs of the adult learner and mutual requirements of sponsoring organisations. The computer is most suited for individualised learning in prescriptive settings, delivering content, and tracking and monitoring what competencies are learnt, interaction with both humans with electronic information is important for adult learners. The challenge is to facilitate adult learners to be both agents of their own learning and evaluators of the learning experience.

Methodology

This qualitative pilot study was designed to capture the participants' EDO experience. Before the program commenced, the EDO Placement Test assessed the language abilities of each participant and provided reading, listening, and grammar scores as well as an overall score. As they were granted access to three levels of the program, the one recommended by the program and two self-selected levels. The program commenced on 1st September 2006 after the participants' exams. While all nine participants were invited for the interview, only seven (five Singaporean and two international students) responded. An open ended small group interview of 2-3 was conducted as an informal conversation between late December 2006 and early January 2007. It sought to understand how the participants were using the program, the lessons they were accessing and skills they were developing, as well as frequency and time of usage. Notes were taken during the interviews and written up. The data was analysed for themes.

Findings

All participants were comfortable learning independently. Having access to different levels helped participants select lessons that suited their needs and skills. They chose to pursue lessons purposefully, namely those that met their goals. Participants used different strategies to attain their goals. Their usage patterns, which depended on internal and external factors, varied.

Discussion

As young adult learners, they active learners, able to learn independently (Brooks, Nolan, & Gallagher, 2001; Dringus, 2000). They learnt differently, in ways that suited their individual needs and personality (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998), and their usage patterns depended on internal (Knowles, 1980, 1984) and external factors. Overall, they enjoyed the online learning experience as it was a means of achieving their goals (Knowles, 1980, 1984).

Conclusion

The preliminary findings indicate that each of participants were happy to learn independently. They were focused, active learners, determined to meet their language learning goals. Their patterns of usage varied, in terms of period of usage and frequency. Their motivation depended on internal as well as external factors.

As this was a pilot study, more work needs to be done. A second interview at the end of the program could have provided a fuller understanding of how they were learning from the program. There could be other sources of data like electronic records of their usage and personal diaries.

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