

Tämä on rinnakkaistallenne alkuperäisestä artikkelista /
This is a self-archived version of the original article.

Version: Publisher's version

Käytä viittauksessa alkuperäistä lähdettä: /

To cite this article please use the original version:

Korkealehto, K. (2022). Student engagement is essential in blended and online language learning. In Luis Gómez Chova; Agustín López Martínez; Joanna Lees (Eds.), EDULEARN22 Proceedings 14th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies. Valencia: IATED.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Kirsi Korkealehto

Häme University of Applied Sciences (FINLAND)

Abstract

The aim of this research is to gain a comprehensive understanding on the aspects that contribute to higher education students' engagement when language studies are implemented with blended learning or online method. The theoretical frame comprises the ecological language learning approach and the notion of engagement.

This research includes three sub-studies, each of which focuses on one language course in a university of applied sciences. In sub-study I, the participants were first-year health care students in a professional English course. The course implementation was based on gamification and a background storyline in which the students were on their practical training period in Spain. The main platform was Seppo-educational game platform. Sub-study II explores the opportunities a telecollaboration project between Finland and New Zealand provides for student engagement. The participants were Finnish business administration students and higher education students of various fields in New Zealand. The target language in the project was German and the main platform for collaboration was a closed Facebook group. Sub-study III investigates a Business English course with different kind individual and collaborative tasks. All course designs deployed multimodality and various digital tools and they were implemented with the blended learning approach.

The data comprises reflective learning diaries in sub-studies I and III, and face-to-face interviews in sub-study II. In addition, pre-and post-course online questionnaires provided secondary data in all sub-studies. The qualitative data were analysed with content analysis methods and the quantitative data with basic statistic methods.

The results indicate that for student engagement, the teacher has an essential impact. The teacher is responsible for the implementation prior, during and after the course. In addition, the teachers need timely knowledge on digital tools, but they also need to master the traditional teacher competences such as subject content, pedagogy, guidance, facilitating and interaction. Teacher is also in the key role in establishing the learning atmosphere which in turn contributes to student engagement. Secondly, students' own activities affect immensely on their engagement. Similarly, collaboration with peers is beneficial for engagement, provided that the students have prepared themselves properly before the collaborative work. Carefully created course design with meaningful, authentic learning activities and relevant digital tools enhance student engagement and offers students enjoyable and purposeful learning experiences.

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

1 INTRODUCTION

Student engagement is essential in all studies, but in online and blended learning approaches the risk of disengagement is greater than in the traditional onsite learning. Further, as language learning demands repetition and persistence, student engagement is imperative and even more important than in other studies.

This research comprises three sub-studies each of which focusing on one blended learning language course in a Finnish university of applied sciences. Besides a learning management system Moodle, all courses deployed several digital tools in their implementation. The main idea was that the students are rather producer that merely consumers of digital technology.

In sub-study I, first-year health-care students conducted their professional English course with the help of the gamified platform Seppo. In sub-study II, a part of higher education students' German course was implemented as a telecollaboration project utilising a closed Facebook group as a platform for student's multimodal posts. In sub-study III, the participants were first year business administration students and the course's main focus was on weekly WhatsApp video calls. The video calls were discussions and different assignments based on each week's topics and led in pairs throughout the course.

Beside the main assignments, all courses deployed several digital tools; in all courses the students made videos, voice recordings and photos. The digital tools were carefully selected, and the

assignments were purposeful leading to the courses' learning objectives. In designing the courses, the teacher aimed to create the courses in a manner that all language competences are enhanced, and the learning activities contribute to achieve the learning objectives. Likewise, the used digital tools are purposeful and useful for the students' other studies and future work as well.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical frame of this research comprises ecological language learning approaches and the notion of student engagement. The ecological approach to learning was modified for language learning acquisition purposes by van Lier [1], [2]. The ecological language learning approach sees language learning as a non-linear, dynamic and complex process. In the process the learner faces opportunities, and through actions and interaction the language learning emerges. The emphasis of ecological language learning approach is on social interaction and learners, their social activity, interaction with others and the environment, but the active learner is at the centre [1], [2]. Learning occurs through artefacts and tools that enhance learners in their learning process. These tools can be understood as buffers between the learner and the environment; digital technology can serve as such a tool by mediating activity and supporting learners' engagement [3], [4].

Student engagement is traditionally considered to comprise three components: behavioural, cognitive and affective [5]. Later, Bowden et al. [6] introduce a model including four pillars: behavioural, affective, social, and cognitive engagement; they added a social engagement component to the widely accepted three-part typology. However, in this study, the notion of engagement is viewed with a holistic view comprising academic and social engagement, without identifying the separate components of behavioural, cognitive and affective, as all the components affect each other and are therefore hard to separate.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this research, the data were collected separately in the three sub-studies. In sub-study I the students wrote their learning diaries after each contact teaching session and returned their finalised learning diaries after completing the entire course. As a secondary data, the students answered an online questionnaire mapping their perception of the course in terms of language learning and engagement.

The data were collected via several methods, as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The participants, the data and the data collection methods.

Sub-study I		
Participants: 23 health care students in a university of applied sciences in Southern Finland		
<i>Data</i>	<i>Time frame</i>	<i>Amount of data</i>
Students' reflective learning diaries	During the entire course, collected after the course	23 learning diaries (29234 words in total)
Post-course questionnaire	End of the course	23 filled-in questionnaires
Sub-study II		
Participants: 12 business administration students in a university of applied sciences in Southern Finland and 14 university students of various fields in a university in New Zealand		
<i>Data</i>	<i>Time frame</i>	<i>Amount of data</i>
Pre-project questionnaire	Prior to the project	11 filled-in questionnaires
Facebook-log	During the project	138 posts (4607 words in total)
Post-project questionnaire	After the project	12 filled-in questionnaires
Face-to-face semi structured individual interviews	After the project	11 interviews (transcription 8605 words in total)
Sub-study III		
Participants: 22 business administration students in a university of applied sciences in Northern Finland		
<i>Data</i>	<i>Time frame</i>	<i>Amount of data</i>
Post-questionnaire with eight open-ended questions	End of the course	22 filled-in questionnaires

In sub-study II the data comprises pre- and post-project online questionnaires, the Facebook-log and a face-to-face, individual semi-structured interviews after the project. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The pre-project questionnaire charted students' preferences of social media platform for the course and the post-project questionnaire mapped their perceptions of the telecollaboration project.

In sub-study III, the participants wrote their learning diaries throughout the course, and replied to the online questionnaire regarding their views of the course.

In all sub-studies the qualitative data were analysed with content analysis methods and the quantitative data with basic statistic methods providing supportive findings for the content analysis results.

4 RESULTS

The main results of this research show that student engagement is a holistic phenomenon which is supported by interconnected aspects as depicted in Figure 1.

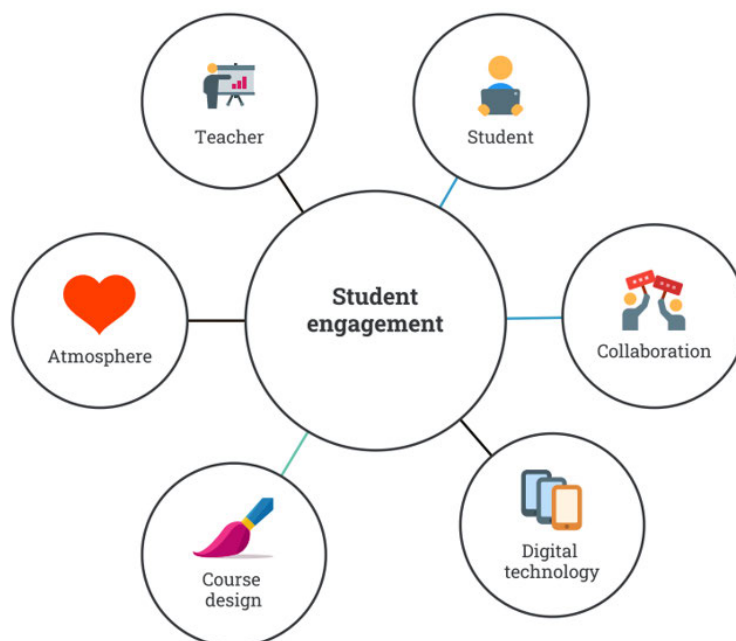


Figure 1. The aspects affecting student engagement.

Teachers' actions contribute tremendously to student engagement, as teachers act as course designers and facilitator using their content and pedagogical expertise in every phase. Further, they need to be fair to their students and offer academic and emotional support as well.

Secondly, students' own activities affect immensely on their engagement. They need to invest time and effort through which they realise their own progress which in turn engages them to try more. Their willingness to interact with their peers and teacher enhances their sense of belonging and engagement. Similarly, collaboration with peers is beneficial for engagement, provided that the students have prepared themselves properly before the collaborative work and the pairs are at the same language level. In addition, collaboration has to be based on mutual respect and trust.

Carefully created course design with meaningful, authentic learning activities, clear instructions and deadlines as well as relevant and timely digital tools enhance student engagement and offers students enjoyable and purposeful learning experiences. All these aspects contribute to the learning atmosphere which should be appreciative and supportive.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research offer useful perspectives for developing engaging online and blended learning courses in language learning. Based on the research, it can be recommended for the teachers

to cultivate further their conventional teacher competences, but also to experiment and embrace digitalisation, and seek creative and innovative solutions for their teaching to engage the students.

However, it is essential to know how to use digital tools, their use needs to be purposeful. Also, it is good to bear in mind that the teacher is in the key role in establishing a positive learning atmosphere. Enjoyability of learning, versatility of learning activities, authenticity, multimodality, as well as teacher's empathy, emotional support and appreciative stress-free learning environment enhances learning and are means to sustain a positive, encouraging and joyful atmosphere for learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my students who voluntarily participated in my research.

REFERENCES

- [1] L. van Lier, "From input to affordance: Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective" In J.P. Lantolf (Eds.) *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning* (pp. 245–259). Oxford University Press. 2000.
- [2] L. van Lier, (Eds.) *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Springer. 2004.
- [3] R. Hampel, *Disruptive technologies and the language classroom: A complex systems theory approach*. Springer Nature. 2019.
- [4] J.P. Lantolf, & S.L. Thorne. "Sociocultural theory and second language learning". In B. Van Patten & J. Williams (Eds.) *Theories in second language acquisition. An introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge. 2006.
- [5] J.A. Fredricks, P.C. Blumenfeld, & A.H. Paris, School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59–109. 2004.
- [6] J. L.-H. Bowden, L. Tickle, & K. Naumann, K. The four pillars of tertiary student engagement and success: A holistic measurement approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–18. 2019.