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Meeting the Learning Needs of Refugees and Migrants in Tertiary Blended ESOL Courses

Author: Katherine Danaher

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Katherine Danaher

Abstract

Technology use in higher education is becoming ubiquitous. However, the particular needs of adult migrant and refugees studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) necessitate careful course design and teaching practice if technology is not to present an insuperable barrier. This article surveys the literature to identify barriers to technology use by these learners, of which literacy and lack of prior experience stand out. Critical success factors in meeting their learning needs are categorized under self-regulated learning skills (as defined by (Zimmerman, 2002)), teacher support and course design. Recommendations include explicit teaching of self-regulated learning skills, using the embedded phases of forethought, performance and reflection. Also, intensive teacher support should be provided and a flexible design model used, with authentic tasks and clear interfaces. These recommendations provide research-informed guidelines for teachers and course designers looking to support the learning needs of adult tertiary refugee and migrant ESOL learners.

Keywords: ESOL, blended, tertiary, learning needs, technology, self-regulated learning skills, refugees, migrants

Introduction

E-learning is becoming embedded in tertiary educational practices (Anderson, Brown, Murray, Simpson, & Mentis, 2006), with a New Zealand government directive to tertiary institutions to prioritize the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in support of life-long learning (Higgins & Prebble, 2009). E-learning is defined by N. Davis, Fletcher, and Absalom (2010) as "the use of digital technologies to support learning and teaching" (p. 16). As in other facets of tertiary education, e-learning is gaining importance in foreign language courses (Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2012). Courses ". . . where traditional delivery is supported to varying degrees by e-learning" are termed blended learning courses (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 17).

Adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners are a diverse group with particular learning needs. They can be categorized as migrants who have chosen to move to New Zealand, or refugees relocated according to an international settlement strategy. Many of those who pursue formal English study choose tertiary institutions for their provision (Ministry of Education, 2003). Refugees are a particularly vulnerable group. They may be involuntary residents of the country, and many have suffered unstable living situations and traumatic events that can negatively impact their resilience and life skills, thus affecting learning ability (Benseman, 2012; Hayward, 2007). Migrant

ESOL learners have a more diverse profile. Some are recent immigrants, while others may have been resident for twenty years or more, managing with 'survival English' (Ministry of Education, 2003) and they may well prioritize family and work considerations over English learning.

Thesis, Methodology and Limitations

This review answers the question: how can e-learning course design and teaching practices best meet the learning needs of adult refugees and migrants studying ESOL in a New Zealand tertiary blended environment? It first outlines barriers to the use of technology by these learners, then identifies critical success factors for e-learning teaching practice and blended course design, with recommendations for teachers and course designers. Literature was drawn from three main sources: first, from New Zealand government documents and government-funded reports; next, from recent international research in the field of technology-enhanced language learning, and third, from general e-learning literature. There is a lack of research evidence directly related to the review question, and much of the literature relates to specific contexts, so conclusions have been generalized from the literature to address the specific question of this review. A limitation of this review is many of the large-scale studies are based on self-selecting questionnaires, where the responder profile could skew the data. Furthermore, this review assumes that e-learning is here to stay; hence low-technology solutions have not been explored.

Barriers

The barriers to success in e-learning environments have here been categorized under literacy, lack of prior experience, cultural factors and age. Low literacy is an important barrier to e-learning. Literacy can be seen through the traditional lens of reading and writing capability, but has also grown to include digital capability and thinking and reflecting skills. Many refugees have an identified literacy problem, which could impact on their ability to succeed in an e-learning environment. Lack of prior experience with technology is also a barrier to success, and many refugees or migrants may not have the experience necessary to take advantage of the features of the technology in their courses. Cultural factors may form a barrier to success in e-learning, but it is difficult to come to specific conclusions about the effect of cultural factors on migrant and refugee success in e-learning contexts. Age may also be a barrier, but certainly not in all cases, and it appears that for some types of learner age correlates with greater success.

Literacy

According to Workbase, New Zealand's largest adult literacy provider, adult literacy includes the skills of ". . . reading, writing, speaking in English, listening, communicating, critical thinking, problem solving, using technology" ("Adult Literacy," 2011, para. 1). The most obvious barrier for ESOL refugees and migrants in e-learning practices is their level of English (Graham, 2011). Lai and Gu (2011) comment that the majority of authentic online text is beyond the level of foreign language learners, possibly decreasing motivation, and also locating the web environment outside the Zone of

Proximal Development, a term coined by Vygotsky (1978) to describe the level to which a learner can stretch, with appropriate support.

Beyond the traditional literacies of reading and writing, digital literacy is also a factor in successful e-learning, although there are differing views on exactly what constitutes digital literacy. While digital literacy skills such as ability to access needed information or operate a digital device have been enumerated in the literature (Hegarty et al., 2010; Ministry of Education, 2012), most researchers identify more general characteristics as pre-requisites for a capable technology user. These include terms implying affective and motivational factors, for example, self-sufficiency, self-efficacy and self-direction (Coryell & Chlup, 2007; J. Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2006; Tyler-Smith, 2006), as well as those including sophisticated thinking and reflective skills, for example, meta-cognition, and 21st century literacy skills, for example, searching the web and critically evaluating the validity of the information (N. Davis, Fletcher, J., 2010; Worrall & Bell, 2007). Regardless of nomenclature, many refugees are under-resourced in these capabilities: 80% of adult quota refugees residing in New Zealand between 1995 and 2001 had not completed a primary school education (Benseman, 2012), and with the complicating effect of trauma on their self-efficacy and personal beliefs, they risk non-completion of e-learning courses (Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Prior experience

While literacy is evidently important for e-learning success, Selim (2007) lists prior technological experience as a critical success factor in e-learning, and in an important quantitative Canadian study, Bernard, Brauer, Abrami, and Surkes (2004) discount the significance of digital literacy, commenting that ". . . prior achievement is still the best predictor of future achievement" (p. 44). Although the latter finding may be somewhat dated, and applies to native speakers studying totally online, valuable parallels may still be drawn. Many refugees have little prior experience of technology-assisted learning, and even migrants who use technology regularly may be unfamiliar with its educational affordances (Albion, Loch, Mula, & Maroulis, 2010). For example, they may use their smartphone for surfing the web and texting, but may not be aware of how to use it to capture video evidence of their learning and upload it to an ePortfolio. With the innovative pedagogical approaches used in successful e-learning, such as authentic learning with its real-life tasks (T.C. Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2002), it is likely most migrants and refugees will find themselves, figuratively as well as literally, in a foreign learning environment. The greater the gap between their traditional and current learning experiences, the more difficulty they might have in adjusting their assumptions about and expectations of the learning experience, thereby potentially decreasing engagement and resulting in higher attrition rates (Jeffrey, Atkins, Laurs, & Mann, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2012; New Zealand Council for Eduational Research, 2004).

Cultural Factors

Commenting on culturally mediated obstacles to success in e-learning is difficult, because of the cultural diversity of refugee and migrant ESOL learners and the paucity of cross-cultural research,

with the little research there is mainly focusing on Asian cultures. Hsu (2013) reports negative attitudes to e-learning by some Japanese, Taiwanese and Thai learners and Morrone (2012) posits this could be due to the culturally high respect in which teachers are held, with a consequent preference for face-to-face over online learning. Large-scale, quantitative research undertaken by Jeffrey et al. (2006) indicates that Chinese and other Asian nationalities display fewer independent learning characteristics than Europeans, potentially signifying less readiness for e-learning. Conversely, Chinese learners indicate a stronger preference than European learners for collaboration, an important characteristic in the e-learning environment. Besides, as Jeffrey et al. (2006) comment, the identification of different learner profiles and preferences raises the question of ". . . whether student preferences should be accommodated (matched) or deliberately not accommodated (mismatched). The results of this study suggest a judicious mix of both approaches is appropriate" (p. 7). It is likely that learner profiles and preferences change with increased familiarity with e-learning, so such a study undertaken today may provide different results.

Age

The impact of age on learning with technology has been debated since Prensky's (2001) introduction of the term 'digital natives': referring to a generation raised with technology whose learning styles and even physical brains have changed as a result. While recent research has not backed up these claims (Jelfs & Richardson, 2013), there are age-related variances in the impact of e-learning. Some researchers found older learners exhibited less confidence and satisfaction with e-learning (Jelfs & Richardson, 2013; Jones, Ramanau, Cross, & Healing, 2010; Lim, Morris, & Yoon, 2006), although Muilenburg and Berge (2005) observed that perceived barriers to e-learning decreased with age. Overall, it is agreed that age is a factor, but Ke and Kwak (2013) warn of the dangers of considering it in isolation from other factors, a singularly apt suggestion for refugee and migrant learners whose bricolage of motivations, cultures and academic backgrounds makes them a particularly heterogeneous group.

Critical Success Factors

Three main success factors are addressed here: self-regulated learning skills, teacher support and course design. Self-regulated learning skills are a group of skills that have been identified as having a positive effect on academic outcomes. They are applied before a task, for example, goal-setting and planning skills; during a task, for example, self motivation strategies; and after a task, for example, reflection skills. Teacher support is very important for success in e-learning, particularly in the early stages of a course. The teacher's role in creating a supportive and safe learning environment is vital, as the experience of a nurturing class community has a positive effect on learning outcomes. In terms of course design, the three main recommendations that have become apparent from the literature are the importance of flexible design, user-friendliness and designing a curriculum that takes into account the time needed for the learning process.

Self-regulated Learning Skills

Much has been written about improving crucial learner capabilities, with general agreement that these need to be taught explicitly, even to adults. Hitch et al. (2012) suggest a resource-based approach to improving academic skills in tertiary settings involving development of an admixture of intrapersonal resources, skills resources and environmental resources. Intrapersonal resources include such inherent qualities as flexibility and patience, whereas skills resources refer to the ability to perform academic tasks such as note taking or research. Environmental resources relate to institutional and personal contexts and can include both social relationships and physical environments. A resource-based approach begins with an extensive individual analysis of each learner's body of resources, and the development of a progression for each academic skill required, with the aim of assisting learners to utilize the resources they have more effectively. The level of analysis required, however, could prove impractical considering teacher workloads. Worrall and Bell (2007) have extended Reeves' (1997) model of web-based learning, expanding it to a 'before', 'during' and 'after' metacognitive approach. Zimmerman (2002), who writes from a psychological standpoint, has developed the more encompassing concept of self-regulation, ". . . the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills" (p. 65). His methods are thorough, adaptable to context, and embed the phases of forethought, performance and reflection into academic tasks. The forethought phase comprises goal setting and strategic planning, as well as strengthening self-motivating beliefs, such as self-efficacy, expectation of outcome and goal orientation. During the performance phase, strategies to perform specific tasks are employed, as well as methods for focusing attention and maintaining self-discipline. The reflection phase takes place after the performance of the task, and results in new goals being set for the next task. This method is adaptable enough to be used in e-learning for refugees and migrants.

Teacher Support

Overall, the literature reveals the need for appropriate support and scaffolding for learners in e-learning environments. Scaffolding is the term used by Vygotsky (1978) to describe the step-by-step and supported nature of learning. Many researchers emphasize the importance of interaction, both teacher-learner and learner-learner (An & Williams, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2012; New Zealand Council for Eduational Research, 2004; Westberry, 2009). In particular, a strong teacher presence is deemed necessary, especially in the beginning stages (Coryell & Chlup, 2007; Hsu, 2013; Tyler-Smith, 2006). A recent study by Cheung and Vogel (2013) on the use of collaborative technologies found that teacher-learner interaction was less significant than peer interaction, but this was in a native speaker context, which cannot be readily generalized to the high-need nature of refugees and migrants, especially with their traditional dependence on the teacher as authority figure (Ministry of Education, 2012). What can be inferred from the study, however, is the importance of establishing a safe and supportive class community, a theme that recurs elsewhere in the literature. Learner-centered teacher variables such as warm, affirming teacher-learner relationships have been shown to have positive effects on educational outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007). Likewise, An and Williams

(2010), Hegarty et al. (2010) and the Ministry of Education (2012) underscore the necessity of creating a learning environment where mistakes are acceptable, comments are supportive and experimentation, play and risk-taking are encouraged. This encourages the development of digital literacy, and reduces learner anxiety about sharing material with an audience, thus maximizing the benefits of collaboration.

Course Design

Several recommendations on course design for successful e-learning have emerged from the literature. First, flexible design is important (Coryell & Chlup, 2007; Hegarty et al., 2010; Ministry of Education, 2012; New Zealand Council for Eduational Research, 2004). This implies individualized needs assessments, choices of learning pathways, consciousness of cultural differences (Hsu, 2013), and awareness of the affordances of technology. A social constructivist approach, with learners the active constructors of their own knowledge, as well as personalized, authentic tasks and extensive collaboration is generally preferred to the "knowledge transmission" model of learning (Hegarty et al., 2010; A. Herrington, Herrington, & Mantei, 2009), although it is important to note that theorists ". . . stress the need for integration across activities, whether associatively (building component skills into extended performance), constructively (integrating skills and knowledge, planning and reflecting), or situatively (developing identities and roles)" (Beetham, 2007, p. 27). Siemens (2006) proposes a connectivist approach, with 'know-where' prioritized over 'know-how', but this would seem to require a greater level of sophistication and autonomy from learners than refugees and migrants may possess.

Because ease of use of e-learning programmes is so crucial to learner success, with its effect on learner attitude and satisfaction (Cheung & Vogel, 2013; Edmunds, Thorpe, & Conole, 2012; Hegarty et al., 2010; Hsu, 2013; Selim, 2007), course information and instructions should be extremely clear, with straightforward learning platforms (Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2013; New Zealand Council for Eduational Research, 2004). The research-based principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are particularly appropriate for refugee and migrant learners, providing ". . . a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs" (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, n.d., para 1). In this way, the diverse needs of refugees and migrants, which arise from differing educational backgrounds, expectations and goals, can be catered to. In particular, providing multiple modes of representation and allowing learners multiple means of demonstrating knowledge would be important. For example, learners may grasp concepts more readily through visual means rather than printed text, or they may find reflection skills easier to master through recording a spoken reflection rather than submitting a written reflection.

Chu and Tsai (2009), Coryell and Chlup (2007) and Hegarty et al. (2010) all highlight the importance of allowing enough time to develop skills and to learn. The face-to-face component of blended learning has a vital role to play here, in development of skills required for the online component (N. Davis et

al., 2010; Hegarty et al., 2010; New Zealand Council for Eduational Research, 2004; Sheriffdeen, 2007). Designing 'white space' into the face-to-face course component would provide unallocated time in the curriculum to respond to the learning needs of particular cohorts of learners. Learners with fewer digital literacy skills, for example, could benefit from technical support, while learners with lower self-regulated learning skills may need extra input on goal-setting or self-evaluation.

Conclusions

Adult refugees and migrants studying ESOL in blended tertiary settings have diverse backgrounds and needs, making e-learning provision complex, yet there is a governmental, institutional and pedagogical imperative for educational innovation, including technology use. This review fills a gap in the literature on course design and teacher support for learners in this context by investigating how their learning needs can be met as they enter an increasingly technology-assisted learning environment.

It is generally agreed that poor English, digital and academic literacies all create obstacles in the e-learning environment, although definitions and terminology vary. Prior academic and technological experience has emerged as a significant predictor of e-learning success, highlighting issues for those refugees and migrants without relevant experience. While there are doubtless cultural differences in attitudes and preferences towards technology, it has not been possible to draw any useful conclusions on this point, because of migrants' and refugees' cultural diversity and the lack of relevant research. This would be a useful direction for future research. Age could be a barrier to e-learning, with a possible deleterious effect on confidence and satisfaction, but caution should be exercised in drawing direct parallels.

Recommendations arising from the thesis question fall into three main categories: self-regulated learning skills, teacher support and course design. It is recommended that self-regulated learning skills be explicitly taught, using the embedded phases of forethought, performance and reflection. This model is easily adaptable to the context of adult refugee and migrants, whose lack of these skills compromises their success in learning. Teachers should support learners by scaffolding tasks carefully, and establishing a tight-knit class community, with a particularly strong teacher presence in initial stages. Adult refugees and migrants are a notably high-need group, so intensive teacher support should be planned for. Blended course design should be flexible, with authentic tasks and clear, easy-to-use interfaces. Realistic learning outcomes, which allow enough time for skills to develop, are vital for these learners, this being of concern in the New Zealand context, with governmental directives to deliver standardized programmes with prescribed assessments. Therefore it is suggested that 'white space' be incorporated into the curriculum, with judicious use of the face-to-face component to maximize the affordances of the online component. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are recommended as providing a particularly appropriate design model, with their emphasis on design practices that cater for diversity. These recommendations provide some research-informed guidelines for teachers and course designers looking to support the learning needs of adult tertiary refugee and migrant ESOL learners.

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