



Recognition of Prior Learning and Blended Learning as Methods of Motivating University Students of Natural Sciences

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Abstract

Recognition of prior learning is a principle in education whereby students have the right to have their non-formal, informal and prior learning recognized as part of their studies, including university education. Blended learning, on the other hand, is a common learning mode in higher education which combines the use of online learning and face-to-face classroom learning. This paper introduces the use of pre-course recognition practices and blended learning as the course mode for Finnish university students of Natural Sciences in their academic English studies. The purpose of these two methods is to motivate and engage students through the validation of their prior learning and through flexible and reflective learning in blended learning environments.

Results indicate that Finnish university students appreciate the chance to demonstrate their prior learning with an exemption examination process and view it as a critical time-saving element in their studies. Similarly, students who take part in the corresponding course also appreciate the flexibility and convenience of blended learning.

1. Introduction

Acknowledging the value of all learning, regardless of where or when acquired, has translated into higher education (HE) as higher education institutions (HEIs) recognize and validate non-formal and informal learning. This typically transpires through the recognition of prior learning (RPL), a well-established principle in HE whereby students have the right to have their relevant learning recognized as part of their HE degrees [1]. RPL is therefore a learner- and learning-centric approach to signify lifelong and life-wide learning, validate the efforts of individuals and enhance their motivation and self-esteem [2]. Therefore, RPL processes can be seen as an integral part of student motivation in higher education and they can be implemented at the beginning of studies or before specific study modules or courses. Another manner to motivate students in higher education is to offer flexible methods of completing their studies. One increasingly popular method is blended learning (BL), a pedagogical model which combines face-to-face classroom teaching with the innovative use of information and communication technology and online learning experiences [3], [4]. This paper introduces the use of recognition of prior learning and blended learning as methods of motivating Finnish university students of Natural Sciences to the study of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as part of their Master's degrees. Students who attended the RPL process and students who attended the blended learning course in the academic year 2015-2016 were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the two methods.

2. RPL and BL as Methods of Motivation

RPL in the European HE context includes the validation of learning from various non-formal and informal experiences and situations provided that the learning can be matched against specified learning outcomes. In effect then, the RPL process is to assess the applicant's experience, skills and to award e.g. credits, exemption or entry. The ideology of recognition of prior learning is often also seen as an element of social justice [5], [6] or an element of empowerment as it allows students to adopt a personal development perspective which involves self-management of competences and increased motivation [7]. Another element of motivation in HE is blended learning, a course mode to enhance pedagogical variety through creating the best flexible mixture of onsite and online learning. Rationales for blended learning have been argued to include supporting flexibility and diversity, enhancing the learning experience, engaging students outside the classroom as well as increased efficiency and cost-effectiveness [8], [9].

These elements of RPL and BL are particularly poignant when teaching EAP for non-native speakers of English at university level such as in Finland, where EAP courses are a required part of university degrees. Finnish students often seek effective and flexible methods of completing their studies and BL

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lends itself well to the practice of academic and field-specific language and communication skills as it allows for flexibility and convenience through the online components while retaining the benefits of classroom communicative and interactive face-to-face experience.

3. The Role of Academic English in Finnish University Degrees of Natural Sciences

English for Academic Purposes is inherently connected to Finnish university studies. Since the 1970s all HE degrees in Finnish science universities have included compulsory language and communication requirements [10]. The purpose is to allow students to develop their field-specific, professional and academic language skills for their studies, future working lives and academic expertise.

If students have acquired the relevant skills of academic English elsewhere, they are entitled to demonstrate their learning through the RPL process, which are typically exemption examinations or portfolios and interviews. However, the number of Finnish students partaking in the RPL examinations for academic English remain quite limited [11] so the majority of Natural Sciences students do in fact attend the courses to develop their academic and professional linguistic expertise.

At the University of Eastern Finland, Master's level students of Natural Sciences must complete a course called Advanced Academic and Professional Communication (AEAPC, 2 ECTS). Students who can match their prior learning to the course learning outcomes can take the RPL exemption examination and students who take the course are offered a blended learning course which combines the use of online and face-to-face learning.

4. RPL and BL implementation with students of Natural Sciences

Students of Natural Sciences at the University of Eastern Finland are provided the chance to participate in the RPL exemption examination before the course AEAPC is organized. If the examination is completed successfully, those students are exempted from the course. Students who fail the examination or do not attend, are provided the blended learning course. The course details, including the RPL option and the blended learning course, are described in table 1.

Table 1. EAP course for students of Natural Sciences

<p>Advanced English Academic and Professional Communication for Natural Sciences CEFR level C1-C2</p>
<p>EAP goals To develop writing and presentation skills in English in the context of academic study of Natural Sciences To develop formal English language use in writing and in oral communication To activate academic vocabulary for increased lexical variety To practise and develop academic presentation skills in connection with individual research interests</p>
<p>RPL exemption examination Exercises on academic style, vocabulary, language and grammar Exercises on referencing Written academic essay on a topic provided Oral academic presentation, prepared in advance, presented in the examination</p>
<p>Blended learning course Kick-off meeting on campus Weekly tasks online Written assignments on academic writing Oral academic presentation delivered on campus</p>

In the academic year 2015-2016, students from both modes, RPL and BL, were invited to be interviewed about their perceptions of the RPL process and the BL course as elements of motivation. Five students of Natural Sciences attended the AEAPC exemption examination in the academic year and all five consented to be interviewed. From the corresponding blended learning course of 25 students, 14 consented to be interviewed but to create a comparable group, five students were randomly selected for data in this study.



4.1 Student Perceptions of the RPL Process

In the semi-structured interviews, the five students who participated in the RPL exemption examination were very appreciative of the possibility to demonstrate their prior learning. The recognition and validation process was seen as a time-saving method so that more time could be spent on other courses, assignments and commitments, including work. While the concept of RPL in HE emphasises the prior learning aspect and the validation of learning regardless of where it has been acquired, a key feature is also the time-saving aspect of RPL and its benefits for the student, the HEI and society. Overall, the RPL participants found the concept of RPL a positive construct and were appreciative of the possibility to demonstrate prior learning with the RPL procedure, even viewing the possibility as a gesture of goodwill from the university to recognize the varying situations of today's adult university students.

4.2 Student Perceptions of the Blended Learning Course

In the semi-structured interviews with the blended learning course participants, of whom five were randomly selected for a comparison group for this paper, four of the five students had enjoyed the blended learning option for the EAP course. Flexibility and convenience were the most frequent mentions, with particular attend to reduced attendance requirements. One student would have preferred the course as classroom learning as he found the reduced face-to-face contact a disadvantage. Admittedly, one of the downsides of blended learning for EAP courses can be the reduced amount of face-to-face communicative practice, even though in the course audio and video were used in the online course activities and tasks. In addition, study motivation and time management were mentioned by several interviewees as a challenge in the blended learning mode where the emphasis was on independent study. It would appear that some students require more structured classroom learning to help them pace the course content and assignments more effectively.

5. Conclusions

Finnish university students of Natural Sciences appear to perceive the methods of the pre-course RPL option and the in-course blended learning as relatively motivational for their study and development of academic English skills. Many RPL participants highlighted the time-saving aspect of RPL and were appreciative of the process to demonstrate their prior learning without having to attend the course. On the other hand, students who attended the course demonstrated mostly enthusiasm for blended learning, particularly for its convenience, flexibility and greater allowances for individual time management. While one student did show an inclination for more face-to-face contact, overall these small-scale results appear to support the implementation of blended learning for EAP courses for motivational purposes. Teaching EAP skills in any higher education institution to non-native speakers of English can be a challenging task but the results of this study indicate that recognition of prior learning and blended learning are viable options that today's skilled and adept students appear to appreciate. Ideally, the results of this paper, while limited in size and scope, will encourage more EAP and science instructors to utilise recognition methods and blended learning with students of Natural Sciences.

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