

Students' Perception on English E-Learning

Ana Guadalupe Torres Hernández, Isaí Guevara Bazán, Leticia Arciga Solorio

Universidad Veracruzana (México)

guatorres@uv.mx

Abstract

E-learning can be defined as the delivery of learning, training or education programs by electronic means involving the use of computers or electronic device. E-learning's main objective consists of solving some common problems of traditional education such as: time, attendance and displacement.

The Universidad Veracruzana, showing an admirable sense of commitment with all the members of its community, has promoted the E-learning in most of the university's educational programs as a feasible option for those students who are not able to attend a face-to-face course.

Eminus, the institutional platform, is a management system for flexible learning environments where teachers can present and distribute educational contents in a "digital campus" for communicating with no distance and time limits.

This paper presents the students' perception on English E-learning through EMINUS, considering different aspects such as study habits, attitudes towards the on line modality, time benefits and e-tutoring. It also explains how the English E-learning process started, how this process has evolved through the years, the process students are following now and where this process is going.

Findings suggest similar perceptions of benefits regarding the aspects mentioned before as well as different views on the four skills in language learning: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

1. Introduction

Today, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have contributed, contribute and continue to contribute to innovation in the global educative system, with the internet as one of the most popular tools in training professionals. However, the use of technology might not result useful without a careful educative program design. If we want our students get a significant and long life learning, it is necessary to work from a pedagogical approach where the implementation of learning virtual communities, the managements of information or content, as well as the generation of new learning strategies can be carried out by highly qualified professionals who consider and analyze the possibilities of ICT to deliver a more engaging and effective learning that supports the promotion of the collaborative work and the introduction of interactivity. It will make those professionals specialists in training design and teaching in E-learning environments. [1]

It is widely known that E-learning definition refers to the delivery of learning systems and educational programs by electronic means involving the use of computers or electronic media. The E-learning is based on the use of different devices to provide students with educational materials. We have also learned that distance education has been commissioned to create the foundations for this new learning modality whose main objective consists of solving some common problems of traditional education such as: time, attendance and displacement besides other issues that arise in traditional education. [2]

Showing an admirable sense of commitment with all the members of its community, the Universidad Veracruzana (UV), has promoted the E-learning, in most of its educational programs, as a feasible option for those students who are not able to attend a face-to-face class by launching different on line courses (for both students and teachers) through Eminus, the institutional platform.

2. Background

2.1 The Eminus platform

The growing demand for higher education has led to institutions and organizations to develop educational platforms that allow them to prepare, implement and integrate flexible learning environments for those students who can't attend a course in person. The Universidad Veracruzana responds to this demand with the development of a distributed education system called Eminus, with the purpose of creating a complete learning environment supported by the use of collaboration and multimedia tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication.



Eminus, the System of Distributed Education was developed by experts from the UV General Management of Information Technologies. Its main purpose consists of supporting the teaching-learning process and the implementation of new educational paradigms.

Eminus also expands coverage and promotes the improvement of educational quality through the incorporation of new processes and materials.

Eminus offers a reliable variety of educational resources for teachers and students as the system guarantees the protection of the information managed by all users. Besides, it is very easy to create, administrate and publish a course in the platform with additional materials such as videos, slides and spreadsheets, to which students can access from all around the world.

Eminus is based on new information technologies and the internet. It integrates educational materials and communication tools that help to create an easy learning environment due to its friendly interface which is very simple to navigate. The system provides students with different tools they can use for a better performance such as: calculator, personal agenda (events), internal messages, forums, chat rooms, collaborative spaces and virtual classrooms. [3]

This system can be used from multiple platforms (Windows, Mac, and Linux) and it is designed to promote learning autonomy as students can take control of their education with no limits of time and space.

2.2 English E-learning through Eminus

In mid-2008, a group of teachers from the UV language Centers with virtual tutoring experience gather for the first time to work in the design and elaboration of learning materials for English on line courses coordinated by outstanding staff from the university's Self-Access Centers. At first, work began with the syllabus for basic levels using the Word format in most materials. Once these materials were carefully revised and approved, they were uploaded to the Eminus platform to offer the first on line English courses at the University.

After we started our experience as on line tutors, we continue to work hard in the improvement and update of the courses by adding audio materials and power point presentations, as well as a series of internet links to help students reinforce their training on English.

In the same way, we have worked to improve the students participation in the discussion forums, in order to accomplish a better interaction and exchange of experiences among them. The evaluation criteria have also required long work sessions to define the proper percentage for each of its rubrics. They include the evaluation of a final project focused in the "task based" approach.

It is noteworthy that the academic work that has been carried out to offer on line courses provides just a starting point on which tutors can base their work because they are free to implement different strategies to improve the quality of the courses. Therefore, it was considered necessary to know the opinion of students who lived and completed this experience, because their vision can establish guidance on the improvements that need to be done.

3. Methodology

The main purpose of this research focused on obtaining information about the English on line courses from the students' point of view in order to get a sense of the benefits and possible limitations they have experienced and thus take the necessary steps for their improvement. Consequently, a methodology with a quantitative approach and a descriptive longitudinal type of study was chosen and the instrument designed to collect the required information was the questionnaire.

3.1 Data collection

The questionnaire was organized in three parts: The first part consisted of five questions concerning personal information, the second part asked seven questions about students' study habits on line and the third, key part of this research, was integrated by 13 questions relating the benefits earned by virtual students regarding variables such as: study skills, language learning, learning abilities, among others, that will be later addressed in detail.

3.2 Sampling

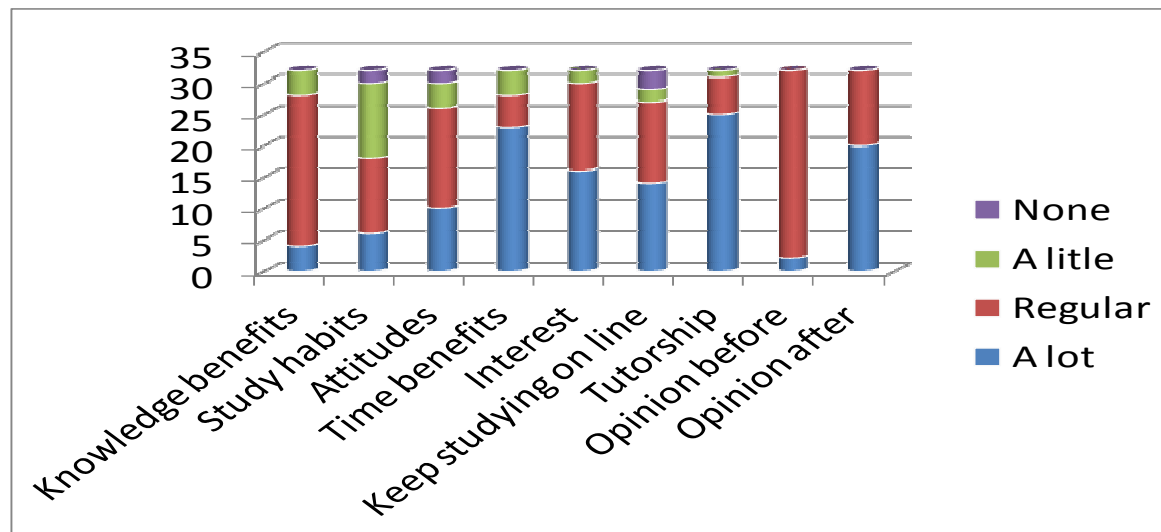
The subset of individuals who participated in this research was selected through a nonprobability sample with a type of accidental sampling. [4] The selected students were the ones who studied the subjects English 1 and English 2 and presented the final examination within the four semesters included from February 2010 to December 2011. They made a total of 32 students.

3.3 Data analysis

This research conducted a descriptive statistic analysis presented in graphics that provide a simple summary of the results obtained from the survey.

4. Results

The graphic below briefly shows the views of students about different aspects of their on line learning process.



Graphic 1.1 Benefits perceived by on line students.

24 of the students who participated in the survey gave a "regular" rate to the improvement they made about the English language knowledge, 4 of them considered they improved "a lot" and 4 of them thought they improved just "a little".

In relation to the improvement of their study habits, six students felt the benefit was "a lot", while 12 students manifested the benefit was "regular" and 12 manifested they improved "a little". 2 of them said there was no improvement.

The variable concerning attitudes considers aspects such as: responsibility, commitment, collaborative work and autonomy. In this respect 10 of the participants manifested they benefited "a lot", 16 reported a "regular" benefit, 4 considered they improved "a little" and 2 considered their attitudes didn't improve. One of the variables that observed a favorable rating was the one regarding the time benefits perceived by students, since 23 of them manifested they benefited "a lot", 5 of them considered the benefit was "regular" and 4 said they benefited "a little".

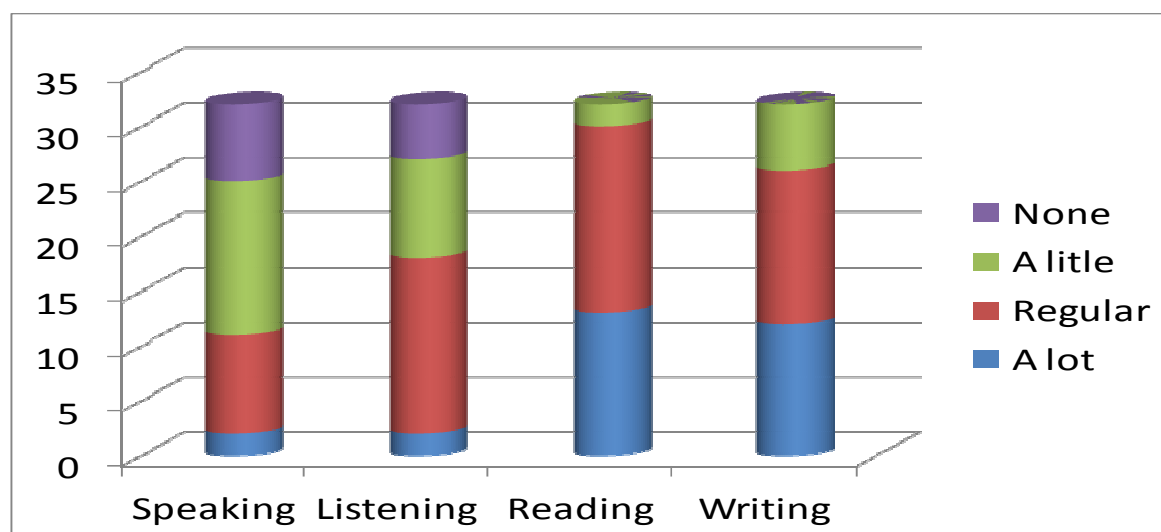
The variable concerning interest tries to find whether the on line modality generated greater motivation in English learning. 16 of the participants noted that their interest in English learning increased "a lot", 14 noted that the increase was "regular" and 2 of them noted their interest increased "a little".

When evaluating if students would be willing to continue studying English on line, we found that 14 of them showed "a lot" of willingness, 13 showed "regular" willingness, 2 manifested "a little" and 3 said they will try a different modality.

The survey also considered an evaluation of the e-tutors by the 32 participants. 25 considered the tutorship they received during the course was good, while 6 considered it was regular and 2 considered it was poor.

The graphic also shows an improvement in the students' opinion about the on line modality after they lived this experience. 30 of the participants considered the modality provides "regular" benefits before enrolling the course. However, after completing the semester, 20 students considered this alternative benefited them "a lot".

Graphic 1.2 shows the benefits perceived by students regarding the four skills in language learning which are: speaking, listening, reading and writing.



Graphic 1.2 Students' opinion regarding benefits in the four language skills

It is interesting to highlight that most students manifested they noted more progress in the reading and writing skills than in the oral production and listening comprehension.

4. Conclusions

Students are aware of the importance of on line courses and the benefits they bring to their professional development as most of them rated almost all the variables as satisfactory ("regular" and "a lot"). However, students think the on line English courses in the Eminus platform do not provide enough benefits or improvement in their oral production and their listening comprehension. This is because the mechanics followed in these courses only consists of reading the materials elaborated by the tutors and answering the exercises uploaded in the platform. Even though we have tried to improve this mechanic by implementing some audio exercises and including some internet links for further practice, we still lack of oral production materials. The oral production practice materials for our on line courses has been left on the discretion of the tutor. Personally, I have tried to fill this gap with "in person" oral production workshops, but these sessions have not had the expected results because most students are not able to attend them.

It has also been difficult to schedule on line workshops using Skype, software for video calls, so it is not possible to state how helpful could this tool result.

Some tutors have tried to support on line students by recording conversations they can listen and repeat. We think these recordings are useful, but there is no formal research about it and they have not been included in the platform materials.

Even though the design and elaboration of on line materials have involved a hard work, it is necessary to carry out a deep analysis on the technological resources we should use according to the learning objectives and content, so we can elaborate better learning and practice materials that help our students improve the four skills. It should be done by all the English e-tutors in order to establish a standardized on line program for all the Language Centers of our institution.

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