

Course-Embedded Student Support for Online English Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper describes an embedded approach to learner support in online English language courses. The support model is based on language acquisition, transactional distance, and self-regulated learning theories. Based on these theories, courses were designed to provide the interaction necessary for academic English language gains, decrease the transactional distance between the teacher and learner, and assist learners in developing the ability to control the factors that affect their learning; in other words, to be self-regulated learners. The latter is critical for those who lack the autonomy needed for successful distance learning. In this paper, three course activities are described and analyzed to demonstrate how the embedded support model responds to the needs of diverse learners and assists them in achieving identified outcomes. The courses were designed for off-site international students enrolled in traditional English-speaking higher education institutions.

Keywords: distance learning; English as a second language; ESL; online English learning; student support

Open, distance, and flexible learning aims to increase access to higher education. It is “a proven means to provide higher education for all, to develop the skills of practitioners in their work place and to provide rapid educational interventions on a large scale” (International Council for Open and Distance Education & European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, 2009). Demand for higher education is increasing. Tertiary level education enrollments worldwide increased by 53% from 2000 to 2007 (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). Distance learning is an increasingly viable means to provide access to a variety of post-secondary degree-seekers. For learners to take full advantage of distance education opportunities, however, particularly globally mobile learners seeking education from institutions outside their own nations, mastering academic English is often a needed prerequisite.

Higher education institutions in English-speaking countries are accustomed to admitting non-native English speakers (NNEs) and screening them to determine their English proficiency levels. Many provide pre- or post-admission English language coursework or other forms of support to help NNEs develop needed academic English and cultural skills (Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth & Harris, 2011). Similar screening and support provisions must occur for learners enrolled in distance coursework and degrees. A strong foundation of academic English is critical to learner achievement in both face-to-face and distance learning contexts. Even with this foundation, NNEs may struggle to adjust to linguistic and cultural demands in their new learning environments (Galloway & Jenkins, 2009; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010).

Determining how to offer distance language learning coursework and support has historically been a challenge (Hurd, 2006). One consideration has been how to replicate the interactivity required for language learning, specifically opportunities for input and output (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996; Swain, 1995). When learners are in environments in which the target language is not used on a daily basis, these opportunities are limited. Additionally, language learners accustomed to teacher-centered approaches may find distance courses particularly challenging due to the transactional distance, or

the gap, between the learner and instructor (Moore, 2013). This can be overcome through course structure and student-instructor dialogue. Finally, learners must possess a degree of autonomy or self-regulation to be successful (Andrade & Bunker, 2011). Autonomy does not imply complete independence but is characterized by collaborative control, in which the teacher and learners manage the learning process together (White, 2003). Self-regulation, or controlling the factors that affect learning, provides a framework for how learners can develop greater capacity for autonomy and managing their own learning. Developing this ability is the primary purpose of embedded support for online English language learners.

To address these challenges, two traditional higher education institutions in the United States designed intermediate-advanced level English language courses for global learners wanting to complete online degrees or transfer to campus to complete degrees. Course designers incorporated activities to address the interactivity, transactional distance, and self-regulation needs described. Thus learners are able to acquire desired language skills and learning behaviors for immediate and future academic success. Related literature and a brief overview of the three theories are next provided. Then specific support activities are described and analyzed to illustrate the embedded support model.

Literature Review

Online language learner support focuses on helping learners be self-directed (Garrison, 2003; White, 2003). This can occur by incorporating learner training and strategy development into courses (White, 2003). Effective strategy use accompanied by self-efficacy and a specific purpose for learning is characteristic of successful online English language learners (Xiao, 2012). These traits—purpose or motive for learning, goal-setting, and methods of learning or strategy use—are dimensions of self-regulated learning (SRL) and can be embedded into a course to improve learner achievement. Achievement promotes feelings of self-efficacy. Other forms of support involve social networking among enrolled students (Dettori & Torsani, 2013). The social aspect of distance language learning is critical in terms of learner support and has implications for instructors as well. When instructors have high transactional presence, or are available and connected to learners, the latter are intrinsically motivated (Belaja, Sai & Lin, 2012). These studies demonstrate that a common theme in distance language learner support research is strategy training and use, social interaction and community, and motivation, all of which are foundational to SRL.

SRL entails individuals taking responsibility for the factors and conditions that affect learning (Dembo, Junge & Lynch, 2006); it consists of six dimensions—motive, methods, time, physical environment, social environment, and performance (Dembo *et al.*, 2006; Zimmerman, 1994). These provide course designers and teachers with a framework that encourages learners to identify *motive* or reasons for learning, practice and apply strategies or learning *methods*, manage *time* and set priorities, ensure that the *physical environment* or study location is conducive to learning, and self-monitor and evaluate *performance*. The *social environment* dimension of SRL involves viewing help-seeking as a positive behavior, determining when to seek help and from whom, and evaluating the results. It does not encourage dependence, but rather good judgment about when, why, and from whom to get help. For language learners, the social environment is particularly significant as it provides interaction opportunities from which they can ascertain their abilities to communicate orally and in writing and make adjustments as needed. Although the quality of distance courses is often a concern (Allen & Seaman, 2013) and a lack of socialization a primary criticism, the latter can be more effective in an online course than a face-to-face course as students can be required to participate in discussion boards, meet with peer tutors or mentors, and work on group projects. These approaches are particularly effective for purposes of language acquisition.

Distance English language learners have specific cultural, educational, and linguistic profiles and needs that must be considered related to strategy and content instruction. These include values, expectations about learning, previously established academic behaviors, beliefs about the role of the teacher and student, and views about effective language learning. In particular, they have distinct needs in terms of the conditions required for effective language acquisition. As indicated, the latter involves input in the form of listening and reading and output in the form of writing and speaking. Opportunities for input and output are critical, particularly for learners in non-English-speaking environments. Learners must interact with a variety of interlocutors to recognize when adjustment in vocabulary, grammar, and syntax is needed in order to be understood (Swain, 1995). “Receiving negative feedback leads learners to consider alternate ways to express their ideas and supports hypothesis testing” (Andrade & Bunker, 2009, p. 56). Language acquisition entails developing communicative competence, which consists of four components: grammatical (syntax, vocabulary, grammar), sociolinguistic (appropriate language use in a particular context), discourse (connecting ideas), and strategic (navigating communication breakdowns) (Canale & Swain, 1980). To develop this competence, a balance of four strands (Nation, 2001) must be included in online course design.

- Meaning focused input: reading and listening for purposes of comprehension
- Meaning focused output: speaking and writing for purposes of communication
- Language focused instruction: deliberate study of the language (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) to understand how linguistic features function
- Fluency development: listening, reading, writing, and speaking practice using familiar vocabulary and structures

As learners strive to develop their English language proficiency, SRL components built into a course can enhance this process. The structure of the SRL activities and the dialogue provided by the teacher and among learners increases learners’ capacity for autonomy, or their ability to be self-directed. Dialogue also provides communicative language practice. The theory of transactional distance explains how structure, dialogue, and autonomy interact with and affect each other. When structure in the form of lesson material, activities, assignments, due dates, and media presentations is set and learners have limited choice, autonomy is low. Autonomy is also low when dialogue or interaction among the teacher and learners in the form of discussion boards, announcements, real-time communication, email, or assignment feedback is extensive. As the amount of structure and dialogue in a course decreases, autonomy increases. The teacher can facilitate higher and lower amounts of structure and dialogue to increase learner autonomy. These transactional components have direct relevance to support in distance language learning contexts; they allow teachers to provide appropriate levels of support while helping learners develop SRL behaviors and increase autonomy. This occurs through the process of collaborative control (White, 2003).

The model of self-regulated distance learning demonstrates how the three theories —language acquisition, transactional distance, and SRL— work together to help learners increase their commitment, English proficiency, SRL behaviors, and autonomy (Andrade, 2012; Andrade & Bunker, 2009, 2011). As learners engage in structured language learning tasks in a course, exercise autonomy in their selection of SRL activities, develop SRL behaviors in each of the six dimensions, engage in dialogue with the instructor and other learners, and monitor their performance, they not only potentially improve their English skills but their overall academic effectiveness. Online learning research demonstrates that self-monitoring; in other words, the performance dimension of SRL, specifically the inclusion of student reflection on learning within a course, provides distinct advantages over courses lacking this component (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia & Jones, 2010). “Overall, the available research evidence suggests that promoting self-reflection, self-regulation

and self-monitoring leads to more positive online learning outcomes. Features such as prompts for reflection, self-explanation and self-monitoring strategies have shown promise for improving online learning outcomes” (Means *et al.*, 2010, p. 45). The following section explains course features that simultaneously provide language acquisition and learner support, and in particular, encourage “self-reflection, self-regulation, and self-monitoring” (Means *et al.*, 2010, p. 45).

Embedded Support in Practice

Based on language acquisition, transactional distance, and self-regulated learning theories, and consistent with the model of self-regulated distance learning (Andrade & Bunker, 2009), I next examine three course features that utilize an embedded support approach. The latter is characterized by support that is internal to a course rather than external such as the availability of learning assistance centers or peer tutors, academic advisement, or technology help desks, all of which are often optional. The embedded support components help learners develop and apply SRL behaviors to improve their academic English skills and course persistence. They also provide learners with the skills needed for sustained academic success. The outcomes of the course components have been reported in other research and include examining student learner journals for evidence of SRL behaviors, review of completion rates and final grades, interviews of students a year after course completion, and exploring the effect of teacher dialogue on SRL development (e.g., Andrade, *in press*; Andrade & Bunker, 2011). Findings from this research and student self-report data from journal entries are included as part of the following discussion.

As noted earlier, these support components are integrated into English language learning courses at the intermediate and advanced levels. The courses focus on helping NNEs develop academic English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. The learners are from a variety of countries in world regions such as South America, Oceania, Asia, Europe, and Africa. Some of the learners will complete online degrees while others will seek admission to a face-to-face institution in an English-speaking country. Course size ranges from 15–25 students. The courses are offered by two different institutions—both of which are traditional and have a specific mandate to extend educational opportunity to learners in developing nations who may not have access to higher education. Thus, the courses are offered to learners at minimal cost and have minimal admission criteria.

A key aim of the activities is socialization, as related to the SRL social environment dimension. This area is considered of general importance to distance or e-learning. “Structured learning activities and opportunities for socialisation are seen to be key for all e-learning—as indeed they have always been for open and distance learning students even when the current extensive range of digital media was not available” (Gaskell, 2012, p. 101). The social aspect of distance learning is even more significant when considering that it creates linguistic interaction opportunities (historically, a major challenge for online language learning), encourages learners to problem-solve independently and in collaboration with peers, and overall, to control the factors that affect their learning, as next described.

All of the course components discussed are situated in SRL theory. The first focuses on helping learners understand and apply SRL and its six dimensions; the other two are applications of specific SRL dimensions. Each activity is described followed by an analysis of benefits and limitations.

The Dimensions of Self-Regulated Learning

The SRL dimensions course component is designed to serve as the backbone to the course. It begins with a diagnostic survey in which students identify their strengths and weaknesses as

language learners. Based on the results, they then select one SRL activity each week from a list of choices (Andrade, 2012; Andrade & Bunker, 2011). The activities are directly related to the six dimensions. Table 1 provides activity examples.

Table 1: Example SRL Activities

SRL Dimension	Name of Activity	Description of Activity
Motive	Setting goals	Two-part activity in which students identify their values; then identify related short, intermediate, and long-terms goals.
Methods	Using the textbook	Students identify the parts of textbook, purposes of the parts, and how to effectively use them.
Time	Evaluating use of time	Students record their activities for 24 hours and categorize them to determine their time use.
Social Environment	Preparing for a tutor appointment	Students apply a 5-step process to prepare for weekly live interactive tutoring sessions.
Physical Environment	Classifying distractors	Students analyze their study locations to determine effectiveness in terms of time of day, distractors, and types of tasks best accomplished in a location.
Performance	Submitting weekly reflections, mid-course and final self-evaluations	Students analyze weekly what they learned from the SRL activity and summarize their findings in a journal; they synthesize and review goal progress and SRL behaviors in mid-course and final evaluations.

After completing an SRL activity, learners are guided through an analysis of the value of the activity, and then summarize their experience in a weekly journal submitted to the teacher. The teacher comments on the depth and detail of the reflection as well as the learners' writing skills, thus language acquisition and SRL development are integrated and reinforced. Students regularly express appreciation for the activities. One indicated the following related to goal-setting: "From doing this activity, I learnt that getting goals is very important for our learning. When we get goals of our learning, we would have more energy to achieve our goals. It gives fresh impetus to us." Similar sentiments are typical for the other SRL activities. These are found in the weekly learner journals and midterm and final self-evaluations (Andrade & Bunker, 2011). Self-selection of activities supports the development of autonomy and learner responsibility.

In terms of limitations, success of the approach depends on teacher understanding and support. Dialogue helps learners see the purpose of the activities and facilitates depth of reflection and writing skill development (Andrade, in press). When teachers fail to facilitate SRL behaviors, learners disregard the activities. Teacher training related to the theoretical underpinnings of the course design and techniques for response can address this challenge. Structure pertaining to the SRL materials, activity self-selection, due dates, and assignment point values must be accurately set up in the learning management system. Issues with this in some iterations of the course resulted in students considering the activities to be optional (Andrade, in press). An additional limitation is the number of activities. These can be expanded on to reflect multiple aspects of each dimension (e.g., see Andrade, 2012; Dembo & Eaton, 2000; Dembo & Seli, 2008), extend learner choice, and encourage autonomy.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring provides learners with opportunities to practice the language as most of them reside in non-English speaking countries. This interaction entails weekly technology-mediated interactive video sessions with a native-English-speaking counterpart at the home campus. Tutoring assignments related to lesson content are set each week and involve discussing the lessons and readings, reviewing writing drafts, composing timed writings and getting feedback, asking grammar questions, reading aloud for help with pronunciation, and addressing individual questions about course logistics, assignments, or technology.

One of the multiple benefits of this assignment is to address the social environment dimension in that learners begin to understand that seeking help is a positive behavior, and become more responsible for identifying and addressing their own learning needs. Peer tutoring also decreases the transactional distance between the learner and the teacher (in this case, the tutor), and provides an additional source of dialogue. As such, learners feel connected to the sponsoring institution, broaden their cultural horizons, strengthen their linguistic skills, and receive feedback on their oral skills and written work. The sessions also provide feedback for the teacher as the tutor passes on information shared by the students related to their experience in the course.

Limitations include difficulty setting up appointments, missed appointments, lack of student preparation, and time zone differences. To address preparation, an activity in the social environment dimension focuses on tutorial preparation steps. Another limitation is tutors' tendency to award full points for assignments although a rubric is provided which aims to discriminate among performance levels. To address this, the teacher must provide expectations and training. In some courses, the teacher has a live interactive appointment with the students at midterm in which progress is reviewed. Teachers are also encouraged to have regular technology-mediated office hours. However, students tend to form a greater connection with the peer tutor than the teacher because they interact with this person weekly. They view the tutor as instrumental in addressing their concerns and providing help. This tends to relegate the teacher to a secondary role. Initially, some students do not distinguish between teacher and peer tutor roles, but this is easily sorted out. Although many students approach the peer tutoring assignment with trepidation due to a lack of confidence in their English skills, this soon becomes one of their favorite parts of the course as attested to by midterm and final performance reports.

Peer-to-Peer Discussion Boards

Peer discussion boards are designed to help learners teach each other. The assignment is structured in terms of topics and guiding questions, number of required posts, and deadlines. Discussion board participation is graded and rubrics provided to make expectations clear. Teachers can divide the class into small groups or allow the entire class to participate together. Learners can be appointed to act in the role of the teacher and facilitate the discussion by posing questions, encouraging participation, and refocusing the discussion.

Discussion boards provide socialization, thereby addressing a common criticism of online learning. They simulate classroom interaction, promote peer support, and offer social networking opportunities. Discussion boards have distinct advantages for English language learners by providing them with time to reflect, carefully compose a response, and engage in authentic communicative situations (Canale & Swain, 1980). They are applying the writing skills they are learning, and developing fluency using known vocabulary and grammatical structures (Nation, 2001). Teacher and peer facilitation of learning in this way supports collaborative control (Andrade, 2013; White, 2003). As such, discussion boards facilitate SRL development and capacity for autonomy as learners seek

help from each other (cf. social environment), share methods of learning, and strengthen their motivation and commitment to the course by forming connections.

Limitations to this assignment potentially include sporadic participation, superficial responses, and the use of informal English rather than formal academic language. Generally, these issues can be addressed by explaining the assignment purpose, providing clear expectations (reflected in a grading rubric), and skilled facilitation. The teacher should allow learners to answer each other's questions rather than immediately responding and thereby creating a teacher-centered environment. Teacher posts must also be limited in frequency to encourage learner discussion. Another issue is that if the assignment is due at the end of the week, learners often do not participate until just before the deadline, thus negating the value of on-going discussion. This can be averted by requiring a certain number of posts at specific times throughout the week.

Conclusion

Open learning is aimed at social equity (White, 2003). Delivery methods such as online learning make it possible for greater numbers of learners to access educational opportunity and improve their lives. Successful completion of these courses is critical. Students must have a positive online experience and possess tools for success. In many cases, academic English skills are a critical prerequisite for other educational opportunities and global mobility. The online English language courses described, characterized by embedded support to help learners develop self-regulation while acquiring needed linguistic skills, is an effective approach to student support. The course components described are easily implemented and can result in increased learner self-regulation and success when guided by appropriate amounts of structure and dialogue.

Although previous research in this area has focused on various aspects of support such as socialization, community, motivation, and strategy use, a theory-based framework that accounts for learner needs and synthesizes multiple approaches is needed. The innovative practice described provides this synthesis by utilizing the six dimensions of SRL and demonstrating how these can be integrated with language acquisition needs and structure, dialogue, and autonomy variables in order to decrease transactional distance and increase online English language learning success.

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