10 English at your fingertips: learning initiatives for rural areas

Lilit Bekaryan[1], Zaruhi Soghomonyan[2], and Arusyak Harutyunyan[3]

Abstract

The present paper addresses the practice of a new English classroom on the model of a free e-learning programme in the context of adult education in Armenia, a country where English is taught as a second foreign language. The research reviews the results and impact of an online English language learning programme initiated for those vulnerable groups who have restricted access to English language resources. The research is built on qualitative data collected through the analysis of evaluation questionnaires and reflection exercises administered on the completion of the course. The aspects explored include the reasons for the high level of dropouts, the importance of maintaining social presence in the virtual learning environment, the learners' cognitive frustration caused by the use of the inductive approach (namely guided discovery on an online platform), and the activities that can foster communication among the learners and encourage them to build a strong and supportive community. Taken together, the results highlight the importance of administering pre-course surveys, adjusting the teaching methodology to the learners' past learning experience and maintaining interaction among the learners. The research will benefit teaching English as a foreign language specialists and curriculum designers engaged in the

1. Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia; lilitelt@gmail.com

2. French University in Armenia, Yerevan, Armenia; zarasoghomonyan@gmail.com

3. International Scientific-Educational Center of NAS RA, Yerevan, Armenia; arusyakharutunyan@yahoo.com

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field of online teaching. The results of the research will be invested in improving the overall quality of the further stages of the programme.

Keywords: online education, online course, online English teaching and learning, student motivation, student dropout.

1. Introduction

Recent learning technologies have led to new opportunities in the field of English language instruction in regions with limited teaching resources. Though being in the spotlight of modern education, online teaching still poses challenges for educators, ranging from a high rate of dropouts (Onah, Sinclair, & Boyatt, 2014), the argument of whether online learners perform as well as those engaged in face-to-face education (Dutton, Dutton, & Perry, 1999), or to the relevance of designing lesson plans for the virtual environment.

In the present paper, an attempt is made to address the generic and specific problems experienced by the team of presenters in the capacity of online course designers and teachers in the context of rural Armenia.

2. Context

In 2014, the US Embassy in Yerevan came up with the *Expanding English Access: Reaching Remote Regions with New Technologies* programme that envisaged teaching English in Armenia's remote regions by offering a blended course of two online and one face-to-face weekly sessions to post-high school youth in hard-to-reach towns. The main goal of the programme was to create a resilient and growing economic environment through improving English knowledge among adults in regions of Armenia. The programme sought to increase competitiveness and address unemployment by building the language skills required to create small and medium enterprises and to expand opportunities for

trade and investment. The programme targeted 17-35 year olds, a demographic group that had no access to classroom resources or instruction if not attending university classes.

The first online course was delivered synchronously with live sessions usually following the same format. The sessions started with a short introductory talk to highlight the target language and the specific language issues that learners needed to consider. The learners were then set a task which they performed after viewing the video about the target communication situation. Afterwards, they responded to the statements on the screen providing answers to the questions or voicing their opinions. Whenever time and the internet connection permitted, this response elicitation took place live online with a learner or a group of learners sharing their video with the whole community online. There was also elicitation of comments in the chat thread. The sessions were usually concluded with the assignment of the offline task to be completed before the next online session. The live sessions took place twice a week, and once a week the learners joined face-to-face instruction in their local groups.

The first round of online classes was launched in 2014, reaching about 100 users. Unfortunately, technical problems, such as low internet penetration or system lapses, were frequent during the first four sessions. Classes were hosted online synchronously in OpenMeetings, a software used for video conferencing, instant messaging, whiteboard, and collaborative document editing. The intended English level of the targeted audience ranged from complete beginners to B1.

Overall, around 120 participants from four different regions participated in this programme, and 88 out of 120 graduated with an improved knowledge of English. Several participants benefited by finding a new job, or using more resources in English during their studies.

Having been considered a success, the programme was followed by a second one in 2016, targeting ten regions with 200 registered participants. The new programme involved one live session per week hosted in OpenMeetings for all the participants and introduced them to the target language of the session, a

two-hour session in Moodle, an open source learning platform that could be accessed at any time (convenient for the users), and an interactive webinar in OpenMeetings for a group of students from the same area. The whole course was divided into four modules, each lasting six weeks. All weekly live sessions were hosted by the course content creators and main teachers. The teachers who shared the same location with the learners managed the interactive webinars over the weekend, consolidating the content they had covered throughout the week. It is worth mentioning that in the second round of the programme, face-to-face meetings were administered every six weeks, being further apart as compared to the first round of the programme. This was because the programme mainly focused on raising the awareness of learning technologies among the residents in rural areas, so a decision was made to reduce the number of face-to-face meetings.

Every six weeks, the participants met in their local group for a two hour face-to-face meeting with their local teacher to discuss any open questions and revise the language of the past sessions. The first round was followed by an immediate reflection exercise initiated to assemble data at factual, contextual and affective levels to improve the experience of the second phase.

3. Method

The evaluation of the project was approached from qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The main evaluation tools included an end-of-course survey completed by 60 participants and informal interviews on the phone with 40 participants who had withdrawn from the project. During the interviews, the learners cited the main reasons for their withdrawal and during the survey they reported what they had found useful about the course, their learning experience overall, and which aspects they would like to see improved if a similar project was hosted. The data collected from the survey aimed to help the teams of teachers and syllabus designers to recognise the problems the participants experienced throughout the project and tackle them in their practice. At the same time, throughout the project, methods of statistical data analysis were used to

keep track of the participants' performance, participation, and progress, both in the Moodle and synchronous sessions.

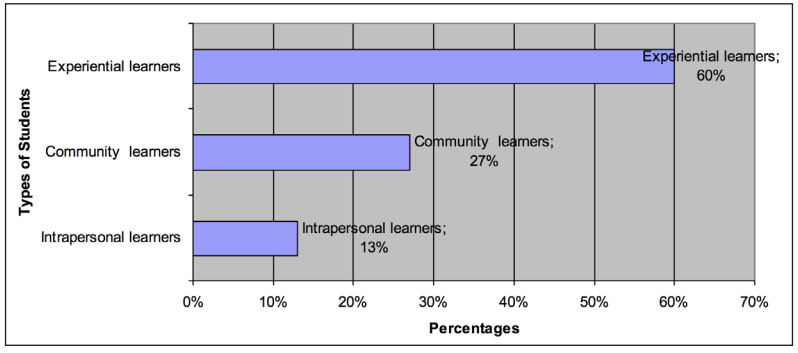
4. Research findings

Despite its versatile format and content, the second phase was more challenging in terms of participant engagement and performance than the first one. To determine the quality and effectiveness of the programme, several factors were examined through the surveys and interviews, among them the participants' dropout rates, completion rate of Moodle lessons, and learners' presence and performance in online sessions and in face-to-face meetings.

4.1. Participation types

Our analysis of the data suggested that our participants demonstrated three types of engagement in the course: moodle-based, face-to-face, and live.

Figure 1. Participation types in percentages



Interestingly, the presence of the participants and their engagement in the course varied depending on their preferred mode of instruction. Hence, the survey suggested that a classification be made between (a) intrapersonal learners, who, being introspective and independent, preferred moodle-based instruction,

(b) experiential learners, who gave preference to face-to-face sessions, as they appreciated constant feedback on their work, and (c) *community* learners who shared the same beliefs about learning, demonstrating a high level of participation in live sessions. Overall, as the statistical data demonstrate, the number of community learners exceeded that of the intrapersonal learners by 14% (Figure 1). Moreover, the number of experiential participants proved to be the highest.

4.2. Retention and dropouts

Most online educators recognise the challenge of learner retention. Research suggests that approximately 70% of adult learners enrolled in an online programme do not complete it and that the dropout rate of learners engaged in online courses is higher than that of students attending face-to face courses (Meister, 2002). Though some researchers might associate a high dropout rate with a failure in online education, others (e.g. Diaz, 2002) argue that the factors affecting the dropout decision are not subject to any control and a high dropout rate is not necessarily indicative of academic non-success.

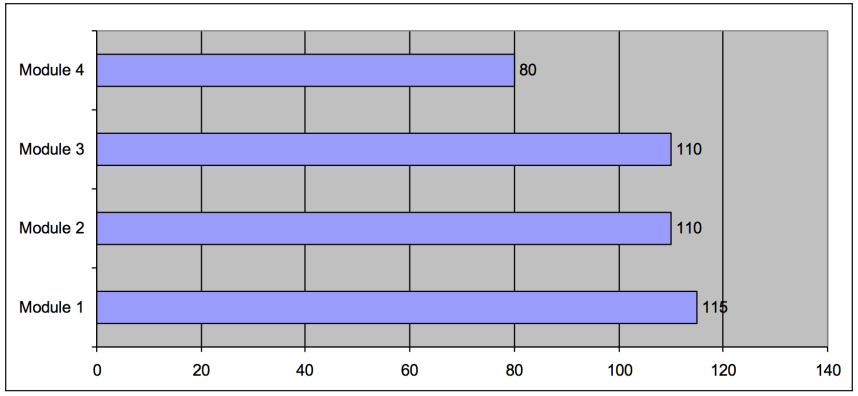
In our case, 115 out of 200 registered participants joined the first module, of which five participants withdrew from the second module. There were only 110 participants both in the second and third modules and 30 learners dropped out in the final module of the course. Hence, throughout the whole project, 120 people had dropped out of the original 200.

Figure 2 below shows the completion rate per modules in the given course. As we can see, figures look more positive for Modules 1 and 2. At the same time, fewer participants joined Module 3, and their participation ratio in Module 4 almost reached a quarter. In this respect, it seems appropriate to look into the possible reasons for the participants' dropouts.

Gibson (1998) identifies student-related factors, educational factors and situational factors accounting for the students withdrawing their participation from distance courses. While student-related factors include the learners'

educational preparation, motivation, and student learning style, educational ones deal with the quality and complexity of educational materials and the provision of tutorial support. Finally, situational factors are related to the changes in life circumstances, family and work. In this programme, for instance, 18% of the learners quit simply because the pressure at work was too high.

Figure 2. Course completion rate per module

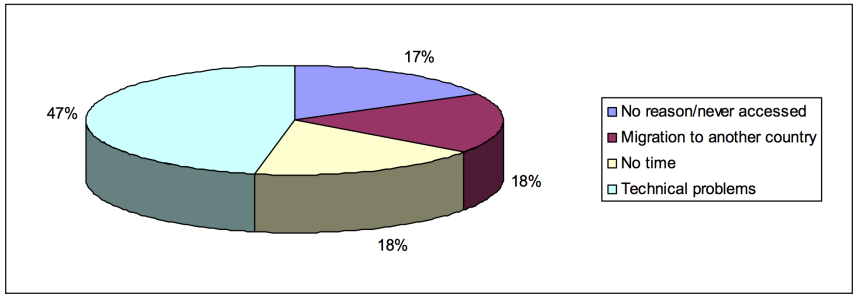


Other reasons for the high rate of dropouts in online courses cited by researchers (e.g. Onah et al., 2014) include lack of time, insufficient instructor support, computer illiteracy and course complexity. All of these factors impede the learners' motivation and discourage their participation in online courses.

Figure 3 below illustrates the key reasons for dropouts in the present programme, based on the results of the survey administered among all the participants of the course upon the completion of Round 2.

The percentage of the learners who never accessed the course made up 17%, while most learners (47%) appeared to have quit the course for technical reasons. 18% of dropouts are ascribed to student-related or situational factors, such as a sudden loss of motivation or migration to another country due to the high level of unemployment among the working age population. As we can see from the chart, situational factors outweigh the educational ones.

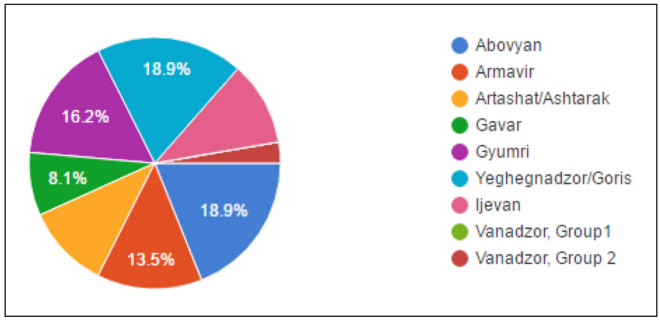
Figure 3. Reasons for dropouts



Interestingly, the geographic locations of the teachers also seem to be related to the dropout rates. Out of the nine local teachers involved in the programme, only two teachers were not directly located in the area their group participants came from and the groups managed by these teachers collected the most dropouts. The teachers teaching in those sites where their learners were located maintained not only *instructional* communication with their learners, entailing synchronous and asynchronous online activities such as discussion forums, live sessions, home assignments or group discussions related to the mechanics and content of the course, but also social communication. As the culture of online communication does not enjoy much popularity with the residents of rural areas in Armenia, teachers were able to communicate with their learners either by phone or during the occasional encounters in the area. The physical proximity also enabled the teachers to be in regular contact with their learners, reminding them to attend their online classes and not to miss the live sessions hosted by the main teacher. The instructor-led communication transformed into a social one where the learners could initiate both virtual and face-to-face interaction with their local teachers. This encouraged the learners to feel both emotionally and personally connected to the group they adhered to. Informal chats with the learners and their comments in forums showed that the course shared this sense of belonging within their local regional group and their participation in the course was more successful and effective. In the two remaining groups whose teachers came from other towns and cities, this social communication was weaker, and hence the learners' motivation to continue the course was affected.

A post-course satisfaction survey was carried out among the participants who successfully completed the course in Module 4. Figure 4 below shows the regional representation of participants per groups from eight regions in Armenia.

Figure 4. Regional representation



During the survey, over 94% of the respondents stated they would recommend this course to their family members, friends and colleagues, while around 60% of the respondents stated that the course had met their expectations and they would definitely recommend it to their community. Some respondents also came up with their suggestions on the next stage of the project: "Thank you for such an interesting and useful English course. The course was really interactive. Looking forward to the next one" (Gohar, 21).

4.3. Programme evaluation

Among the most important drawbacks the team highlighted was the lack of a pre-course survey with the aim of understanding what participants' expectations and needs were. It has been repeatedly ascertained that the use of pre-course surveys allows the instructors to assess students' prior knowledge and expectations. In this particular case, there was no pre-course survey due to the low budget and insufficient resources of the project. We are inclined to think that in case student expectations had been revealed, it would have been possible not only to adapt the course design to the needs of the course participants, but also to retain more students.

Another lesson learnt was the inefficient organization of socialising activities, which resulted in loose attachment of the learners to the course. Throughout recent years, with the emergence of a myriad of online courses offered by top-ranking universities, more and more research is being conducted with the aim of revealing the components that are necessary to ensure a high level of retention among the participants of e-learning courses. Findings suggest that building a community in an online course impacts student success and retention. Students feel more comfortable and less isolated when developing a sense of belonging to a certain community (Paul, 2013).

Upon the start of the second phase, an attempt was made at building rapport and a sense of community among the learners by asking them to post something about themselves and to comment on the posts of at least two other learners. However, since the number of participants was high and no grade was given to forum participation, some of the learners would not post or comment, thus encouraging isolation. The teaching team addressed this issue by being constantly present and commenting on the posts, since based on their classroom experience they knew that most Armenian learners, who are used to traditional schooling and are prone to viewing online courses as something superficial, welcome instructor comments and/or intervention, as it makes them feel heard and evaluated. This approach worked and enhanced the learners' participation in forums.

As far as teaching methods and methodologies are concerned, it is worth mentioning that the Guided-Discovery[4] (GD), a technique which is believed to be a successful inductive approach and is advocated by English language teaching experts and professionals, did not work well with this particular group of learners. Trying to reduce their teacher talking time in live sessions, teachers occasionally resorted to the use of GD when eliciting the target language for the participants not to act as passive listeners and join the discussions. Though the learners were quite active and seemed to be quite enthusiastic about the procedure as a whole, post-course surveys came to prove the reverse. When assessing the instructors' performance, the learners (80%) reported their

4. A technique where a teacher provides examples of a language item and helps the learners to find the rules themselves; see https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/guided-discovery

discomfort and frustration over the teacher(s) not teaching them anything but demanding that they work out the rules and answers on their own. This leads us again to the issue of addressing the learners' learning experience to be able to plan and deliver a lesson that would meet their expectations and learning styles. As we know, a GD problem must be adequately scaffolded to be successful in the classroom (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007) for the learners to remain within their zone of proximal development, the zone between what they can do on their own and what they cannot do, even with help (Vygotsky, 1978). In our case, the scaffolding stage was not completely successful, as though a placement language test had been administered upon the start of the course, the learners' past learning experience and expectations had not been considered. The next stage of the project, however, will consider a needs analysis not only as a pre-stage for the course design, but as an ongoing process targeted at improving the delivery of the course.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study provide some important insights into the cognitive and psychological effects of virtual instruction. Contrary to what we expected, the methods that seem to work quite well in face-to-face instruction might not prove to be as effective in the virtual environment. In this respect, it will help to consider the learning background and the past experience of the course participants before planning and delivering the course.

To build a resilient learner community, it is recommended that the format of the learning experience be more group-based rather than self-paced through the implementation of pair and/or group programmes to develop the sense of community belonging among the learners and hence foster their motivation. It is also suggested that future courses feature an online map of Armenia with the participants' home locations highlighted to illustrate how many people from every region in Armenia are attending the course. If the software permits, the map will help keep track of the improvement the participants are making and show which community enjoys the highest rates in terms of activity, module

completion and overall progress. This will encourage the learners to work more effectively towards a common goal they share.

Despite dropouts being an unavoidable element of any online course, it might be appropriate to tackle this problem in advance to the course delivery and to request that the enrolled participants sign an agreement stating their commitment to the course. An extended orientation stage for learners to familiarise themselves with the format of the virtual learning environment might also help the learners avoid technical problems. Finally, introducing a clear grading system will encourage the learners to contribute to the forums and online discussions.

When the aforementioned challenges are overcome, it is anticipated that the *Reaching Remote Regions with New Technologies* programme will enrich their growth potential, capacity building, and exert a stronger impact on vulnerable communities in Armenia.

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