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Can it be as effective? Distance versus blended learning in a web-based EAP programme

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Abstract

This paper discusses the effectiveness of a web-based learning programme of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for British students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Original web-based materials for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) were developed and 43 student volunteers participated in two different modes of learning during the 9-week long programme: through blended learning and at a distance. The study attempts to investigate which mode of delivery is more effective in terms of student retention, achievement levels and satisfaction with the programme. The study found that the blended learning mode was much more effective in student retention in this non-credit bearing programme, whilst students' achievement levels were similar in both groups. In addition, formative and summative feedback from the students suggests that most students in both groups were satisfied with this web-based EAP programme.

1 Introduction

The English for Excellence (EfE) project is jointly funded by the University of Luton and the Higher Education European Social Fund (HEESF). It is motivated by the high non-completion rate in new (post-1992) universities, by the reported underachievement of students from ethnic minorities (Connor, Tyers, Davis, Tackey & Modood, 2003), and by the resulting likelihood of them withdrawing from their studies. The project aims to provide tuition in academic communication skills for students from ethnic minority backgrounds. It is expected to contribute towards increasing these students' academic success, and in turn to contribute towards their retention in higher education.

The web has been chosen as a medium of instruction in the learning programme run by the project because of advantages such as time flexibility, ability to facilitate student-centred learning, flexible access to materials, reinforced learning, privacy, ability to repeat tasks, and wealth of information (Felix, 2001). Several studies (Chen *et al.*,

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2004; Jarvis, 2001, 2004; Nesi, 1998; Stapleton, 2003) have reported on the advantages of teaching and learning EAP courses in a web-mediated environment. More institutions, however, seem to use the web as a wealth of resources rather than authoring their own materials in the environment. Jarvis (2004) reports that only three British higher education institutions maintained that they had authored their own computer-mediated EAP materials.

The web can be employed in varied ways in a learning environment. It can be used in stand-alone courses such as distance learning programmes or in various forms of blended learning environment, i.e., using the web-based materials in face-to-face teaching. Felix's (2001) investigation found that students are on the whole positively inclined to working with the web but that that the majority of students prefer to use the web as an add-on to face-to-face teaching, in other words, in blended learning.

Meanwhile, there has been an increase in the distance learning courses based on web technology. Distance learning has always been a favoured option for many adult learners with professional or family commitments (Harris, 2003; Sampson, 2003) because of its advantages of convenience, flexibility, and adaptability to suit individual students' needs (Holmberg, 1989, in Sampson, 2003). The introduction of the web into distance learning has, however, brought in the further possibility of interaction between students and between students and teacher, thereby making it possible 'to incorporate online discussion as a primary component of the course' (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003: 119).

However, distance learning can sometimes be more difficult to achieve successfully than classroom-based learning. A number of researchers have pointed out the challenges of distance learning in terms of the problem of sustaining learners' motivation (Sampson, 2003; Strambi & Bouvet, 2003), developing learner autonomy (Harris, 2003; Sampson, 2003), and an inappropriate or non-existent support system (Sampson, 2003). Some studies, which have attempted to examine ways of overcoming the weaknesses of distance environments and maximise learning, point out the need for an effective support system (Sampson, 2003) and the importance of interaction (Pawan *et al.*, 2003; Strambi & Bouvet, 2003).

The English for Excellence project at the University of Luton has authored a web-based EAP course to help British students from ethnic minority backgrounds with their academic communication skills; in particular, written communication skills. This paper aims to report and discuss the findings from the second delivery of the English for Excellence course, which took place in two different modes: through blended learning and by distance. The study attempts to investigate which mode of delivery is more effective for these students from ethnic minority backgrounds in terms of student retention (i.e., course completion rates), achievement (measured by pre- and post-test results) and satisfaction with the programme (represented by their self-report through questionnaires).

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

Forty-three student volunteers at the University of Luton participated in the nine-week programme between 26 February and 13 May, 2004 (including a three-week Easter

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break), out of whom 23 were taught in a blended learning environment (i.e., they received face-to-face instruction in the classroom and used web-based materials) and twenty by distance. These volunteers were from various backgrounds in terms of their degree level, discipline, and age although all of them were British students from ethnic minorities. Out of the 43, forty were undergraduates, and three were postgraduates. They were from twelve different disciplines although most of them were from three disciplines: Health Science, Business and Marketing, and Law, Finance and Accounting. Their ages ranged from 18 to 52, with most being in the age group of 18–25.

Participating students were registered according to their preferences in the two learning modes. The number of students who enrolled in blended learning was initially 33 and for distance learning it was ten. Clearly the blended mode was the preferred option. However, there were some fluctuations in numbers during the course of the programme, since ten students from the blended learning transferred to the distance learning mode early in the programme, mainly because of clashes in timetables or other commitments, thereby raising the number of distance learners to twenty and reducing the blended learners to 23. Out of the ten transferees, only one attended one class session before transferring to the distance mode.

2.2 Materials

The original learning materials used in the study were specifically developed, based on an analysis of students' target needs and learning needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The materials were not, however, discipline specific, so efforts were made to provide different examples from various disciplines. The learning materials were grouped under various themes such as organising essays, writing effective paragraphs, referencing, caution, certainty and attitude in academic writing, etc. Each theme was developed in one lesson. There were also additional tutorials which were organised under specific skills such as grammar, academic writing, and academic vocabulary. All individual tutorials and lessons adopted an inductive approach whereby students were asked to identify rhetorical strategies used by academic authors in authentic texts, followed by explanations and tasks for learners to perform to reinforce their learning. The materials were designed to accommodate distance learners. In other words, each lesson was structured as if it were one class session in a self-access programme. First of all, the aims and objectives of the lesson were explained and a brief outline of the lesson was provided. Each lesson point was then pursued in the order of examples of rhetorical strategies in authentic texts, detailed explanations of the strategies, tasks to practise what they have just learned, and the suggested answer(s) to the tasks. The materials could therefore be easily followed by distance if students wished to do so, while the teacher's role as a face-to-face instructor was not strictly required.

These learning materials were web-based, so students could access the materials at any time and place. The website was interactive and included learning support features such as 'Save your work' (for saving their work to go back to later), 'Notebook' (for making personal notes), 'Self-assessment' (for students to assess their own learning against learning objectives at the end of each lesson/tutorial), and 'Feedback' (for students to give their feedback on lessons and tutorials) as well as other features to facili-

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tate communication between the tutors and the learners and/or between learners themselves, such as 'Chat' (for tutors or learners to leave their messages, or discuss) and 'Noticeboard'(for tutors to post messages to students).

Students were also provided with a handbook, which was originally designed for distance learners, but it was later decided that students in blended learning might benefit from it as well. The handbook was intended as an instant point of help when needed, and as a self-management tool for students. The handbook stated the aims and objectives of the course, the website contents, instructions on how to use the website, various ways to make the best of the learning programme, and answers to frequently asked questions.

2.3 Procedures

Before the course

Both groups of learners were interviewed regarding their needs in Academic English (interview questions in Appendix A) before they participated in the learning programme. Those interviews informed the development of the materials. Learners also took a diagnostic test comprising summarising from a short text and writing a mini-essay on a given topic. Essay topics and reading passages for both tests were of general interest, since students were from different disciplines. Both the pre-test and post-test were marked on a 3-point scale for the summarising task and on a 5-point scale for the essay writing task, with higher scales meaning better performance. Giving in-between scales (e.g., 2.5) was also allowed when the markers had difficulty in assigning a definite grade to a test. The following shows what each scale stands for:

Reading and summarising:
3 = Accurate summary in clear academic English with no language problems
2 = Partially accurate summary; language problems and/or missing information
1 = Not a summary, most information absent or many language problems

Essay Writing:
5 = Strong answer showing full academic competence
4 = Good answer showing a moderate degree of academic competence
3 = Fair answer showing some academic competence but lacking some areas
2 = Understandable answer but with many errors in language and no command of academic style
1 = Very weak written proficiency (neither academic style nor clear English)

An induction session was provided, in the first class for students in the blended learning programme, and by appointment for distance learners. Induction for distance learners was provided at an individual session of about an hour. During the session, they were shown how to use the website: accessing the materials, going through each lesson, saving their work, sending a message to a tutor, leaving feedback, and so on. Students' questions relevant to all aspects of the learning programme were also dealt with in this session.

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During the course

a. The students then participated in the programme for nine weeks. Both groups used the same materials with or without the teacher's instruction in class. Distance learners were advised to complete one particular lesson each week.
b. Teaching approaches for the two groups were very different. For distance learners, teachers functioned mainly as helper, mentor, and facilitator, whereas in the blended learning environment, teachers assumed more active roles including main instructor, helper, mentor, and facilitator. Discussions and exchanges of opinions between students were also encouraged in verbal form for blended learning and in written form for distance learning.
c. Active support was also provided in the form of weekly tutorials. Both groups of learners were invited to weekly tutorials where they could ask questions or ask for help from tutors. Emails and phonecalls to tutors were also encouraged.
d. In addition, distance learners received a weekly phonecall from the project team to monitor their progress. Students were asked whether they had completed the lesson for the week and whether they had had any problems or questions on the particular lesson. Where necessary, follow-up phonecalls or emails followed, to answer students' questions in more detail.
e. On completion of each lesson both groups of students were required to leave feedback on the lesson they had studied. Their feedback on learning materials informed modification of the lesson content for later cohorts of students and feedback on other elements of the lesson was immediately reflected in the project team's action plan. For example, students' negative comments on the functionality of the website led the project team to change the website hosting company. In addition, feedback was also used as part of the measurement of students' satisfaction with various elements of the course.
f. All students were also encouraged to submit a written assignment on a given topic each week. Submitted homework was returned to the students with teachers' detailed comments.
g. The support received by the two groups of learners therefore differed in the more personalised face-to-face classroom interaction for blended learning students, as opposed to weekly phonecalls for distance learners. Other types of support were, however, equally available to both groups.

After the course

After completing the nine-week course, the students took a post-test comprising the same two parts as above and completed questionnaires (Appendix B) indicating their satisfaction with the programme.

3 Results

3.1 Student Retention

Out of the 43 students who initially enrolled in the course, thirty students (69.8%) completed the course. Among them, twenty were from the blended learning group and ten

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from the distance group. In other words, whilst only three students (13%) dropped out of the course from the blended learning group (87% retention rate), 50% of the distance students left the course without completing. This clearly indicates that the blended learning mode was much more effective in student retention in this non-credit bearing voluntary learning programme. The project team asked the early leavers the reasons for leaving the course. Out of the three blended learning dropouts only one student provided an answer, attributing her decision to personal reasons. The other two were not contactable. As regards distance early leavers, two students blamed their degree course workload, three students were not contactable, and the remaining five stated until the last minute that they would complete the course after they had finished other more urgent assignments. This indicates that the priorities of the students certainly lay with their degree course work, and that many of them were not able to realise what they intended to do. The reasons for early leaving therefore do not seem to lie with dissatisfaction with the course but with their own personal situation.

3.2 Student achievement levels

The test results in Figure 1 (based on completers only) display that average grades for the essay writing part increased for both groups. For blended learning students, the pre-test average grade for essay was 2.84 which increased to 3.27 in the post-test. The distance learners' post-test average also increased to 3.88 from 3.05. In other words, the increase in post-test grades for the distance learners was higher than for the blended learners. This might have to do with the characteristics of distance learners. The fact that they have completed the course on their own clearly suggests their strong motivation and willpower, since less motivated distance learners left the course without completing it. It may therefore be natural that these strongly motivated students achieved more. Among blended learning students, the ones who had attended the classes more regularly tended to have higher increases in their post-test writing part. For example, out of the six students whose post-test grades went two scales up from their pre-tests, five were regular attendees with one student attending only half the classes.

The average grade for the reading/summarising part nonetheless did not show any substantial increase for either group. The average grades for both groups for summarising were 1.85 on the pre-test and stayed more or less the same on the post-test (1.86 for blended/1.88 for distance). This might have to do with the fact that the learners had only one lesson wholly devoted to practising writing summaries. The students did not seem

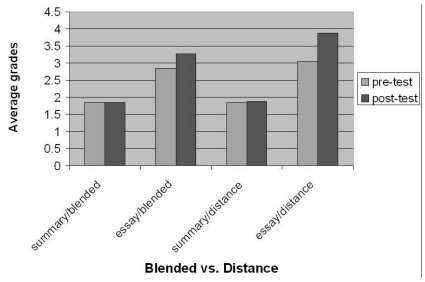


Fig. 1. Pre-test vs. post-test.

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to put further effort into this, as the project team had hoped.

The improved performance of both groups on the post-test indicates that distance learning in this particular context proved as effective as blended learning.

3.3 Formative feedback from students

On completion of each lesson, both groups of students left feedback indicating what they found the most/least useful components of the lesson. They were also encouraged to comment on other aspects of the lesson which were not necessarily related to the lesson content, such as technical problems. On average, about ten learners in blended learning and five distance learners left feedback on each lesson.

Both groups of learners gave more positive feedback than negative. On average, there were ten instances of favourable feedback (five from distance learners) to four instances of negative feedback (two to three from distance learners). Student feedback on the most useful components of the lesson includes the following (distance learners' comments in italics):

- I found most useful the characteristics of academic writing, the difference of the informal style and preferred informal style. The exercises and tuition are clear and informative.
- Lesson three has been very useful in identifying the way in which sentences are linked together, and how to organise paragraphs. I particularly enjoyed the task on cohesion, where the missing words had to be placed in the correct slot. This was very useful to me because it showed how the sentence is formed. Thank you for a nice 2 hours, I found it very useful indeed.
- *Interesting to encounter the style of writing a paragraph. The indication of how to make it flow was particularly useful I thought.*
- *I found the use of tenses in academic writing past, present and present perfect useful. I liked the exercise that you had to fill in the gaps with the correct tense.*

Students' comments mainly focused on the type of tasks they found useful and their relevance to their needs.

A comparison of the negative feedback on each lesson from the two groups shows that distance learners tended to identify and elaborate on more problems than blended learning students. For example, for one of the lessons eleven learners in blended learning left negative feedback (by writing something in the box for the least useful components), out of which the feedback from six students could not be counted as negative since the comments were 'nothing', 'no', 'it's all good', and 'everything was useful to me'. In contrast, out of eight instances of negative feedback from the distance students, six were genuinely negative. In addition, out of eleven occurrences of negative feedback provided from the blended learning students for another lesson, none was genuinely negative about the lesson content (except for a complaint about technical problems), whilst all three from distance learners for that lesson were genuinely negative. The distance learners might feel that they need to fully explain the problems in the feedback box, whilst the learners in blended learning might resort to talking to the tutors. If this is the case, this is not necessarily a bad thing. At least it shows that distance learners tried to

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let the tutors know what happened during study at their isolated locations. The following feedback from a distance learner appears to be a good example of how detailed they tended to be:

- *The section about the adverbs I think could be more specific and less wording may help to make the understanding of this section easier. I understand what an adverb is and why it sounds better to incorporate them into a sentence. However, I think I would have understood it better if the context were to be more simple and not so advanced. Short sentences to show the point and then again, a short explanation.*

More distance learners' elaboration on negative feedback can be seen in the following:

- *The in-text referencing. However, the bibliography was slightly confusing. Perhaps [it is] a case of learning the layout and applying it.*
- *The part where we had to re-phrase a sentence to obtain a post-modified or a pre-modified sentence. Perhaps it is more appealing to other students, however it was found to be less useful to myself.*

Distance students seem to be more conscious of the problematic areas of the lessons. This could be related to them not being able to access immediate help, in contrast to blended learning students. Many blended learning students asked for clarification when they found something was not clear to them, and actively enlisted help while performing various tasks. On the other hand, distance learners were not able to do this on the spot. Help was available to them in the form of phonecalls, emails, or tutorial sessions, but they did not seem to be making the most of this help. They identified problems but did not seem to make further efforts to rectify situations. Alternatively, they might not have found the nature of the problems serious. In other words, they had problems during the lesson, so they identified them, but did not consider them serious enough to enlist the help of a tutor. Over time their perception of the seriousness of the problems could have dwindled. Blended learning students, in contrast, had immediate help standing by in the form of tutors. When they encountered problems they could ask for help, which was provided on the spot. Negative feedback from the blended learning group includes:

- It wasn't emphasised enough of how to structure the middle of an essay and also handouts for this topic especially would be useful for future assignments.
- reading the long extract and highlighting the important points. It was too long.

Some of the blended group's negative feedback was about technical problems whereas only one complaint of this nature was made by distance learners. In addition, in contrast to the blended learners' succinct complaints, the distance learner's complaint seemed more elaborate:

- *There was one page that was not [laid] out properly and I couldn't read a question properly because words were overlapping. Also my task 2 page crashed once*

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> *I had finished[.] It started at the bottom of the page my session had timed out and there was a page error but I didn't take that long to complete it in fact I did it quite fast. However I saved the page onto my laptop and will go on to lesson 2.*

This may be due to the fact that there have been several instances of website crashing in class. Distance learners were not bound to timetables like the blended learners. If the website or the internet crashed while they were working, distance learners could discontinue the lesson for later resumption, which could be frustrating but not as frustrating as waiting for the internet service to resume in class. In those instances in the blended environment, the tutors had a hard copy of the lesson materials and had a teaching assistant photocopy them immediately.

3.4 Summative feedback from students

After they finished the course, both groups of students provided feedback by completing two questionnaires on various aspects of the programme such as the course content, functionality of the website, usefulness of the learning support facilities on the website, etc. The first questionnaire focused on the programme content and teaching, and the second on the functionality of the website. Both questionnaires were mostly of multiple-choice type with space for students' extra comments for each question.

On the questionnaire for the course content, both groups of students agreed that their needs had been assessed at the start of the EfE course, with 50% of the students saying 'yes', 45% (40% distance learners) stating 'to a certain degree', and only 5% (10% distance) saying 'no'. On the question of whether their needs were met on the course, distance learners gave more positive feedback than blended learning students, with 60% of them showing full satisfaction with the course. Only 30% of blended learning students did so by choosing 'yes'. Sixty-five per cent of blended learning students stated that their needs were met to a certain degree, in comparison with 40% of the distance learners. None of the distance learners thought that their needs were not met, whilst one blended learner thought so. Students' comments include:

- My writing work is improving
- *I have leant much in structuring essays, as well as summarising and referencing content*
- *The course has been useful on the areas I needed help on.*

For the more specific questions about the usefulness and relevance of the website content, 94.7% of the blended learning group and 90% of the distance agreed (or strongly agreed) that it was useful, and 94.4% of the blended and 80% of the distance agreed (or strongly agreed) that it was relevant. Students' comments include the following:

- Everything was relevant, also I used the majority of the content for my degree course.
- Very informative and useful for academic writing
- *I found something to practice in all areas of essay writing.*
- *A lot of the topics were useful for my academic assignments.*

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All students from both groups thought they had learned useful academic English skills on the course with a differentiation of 70% (saying 'yes') and 30% (saying 'to a certain degree'), the percentages being the same for both groups. Students commented as follows:

- The clarity of my written work has improved.
- Learnt a lot in various aspects of academic writing.
- *The skills I have learnt will help to write better assignments in future modules.*

In the question of whether tutors' feedback on their homework was constructive, about half of the members from each group stated 'yes' (e.g., one student said 'it helped to highlight what areas I need to improve) and 26.7% of the blended learners and 33.3% of the distance stated 'to a certain degree', but 20% of the blended group and 16.7% of the distance did not think so. Most students who chose the 'no' option however commented that they had not done any homework so had not had any opportunity to receive any feedback.

In the question of whether they had been able to apply what they learned from the EfE course to their degree coursework, most students were in the affirmative with 65% (66.7% distance) stating 'yes', 35% (22.2% distance) 'to a certain degree' and only one distance learner 'no'.

Students' answers for the frequency of using and usefulness of the handbook, emails and phonecalls to tutors, and individual tutorials are shown in Figures 2 and 3.
Some noticeable points emerged from these answers. Firstly, regarding the handbook, although 53.1% of blended learning students and 70% of the distance learners admitted its usefulness, only half the students from each group used it on a regular basis, ie. a few times or every week. What differed from our expectations was that a higher proportion of the blended learning group used the handbook than the distance learners, and that none of the distance learners attended individual tutorial sessions whilst 14.8% of blended learning students did.

Five questions were devoted only to blended learning aspects. About the pace of the classes, 55% of the students stated 'appropriate' (35% 'to a certain degree'), and 10% did not think it was appropriate. About the standard of teaching, all students agreed it

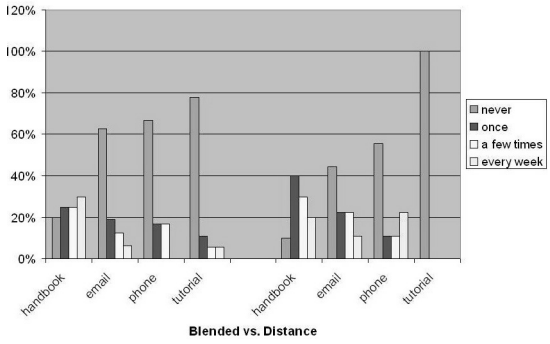


Fig. 2. Frequency of using support facilities.

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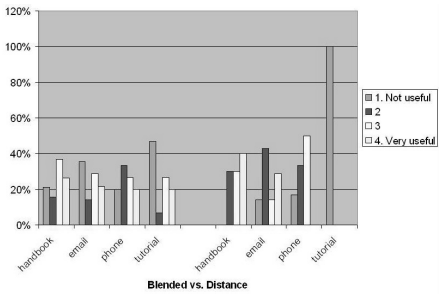


Fig. 3. Usefulness of support facilities.

was good (65%) or good to a certain degree (35%). For the question of whether the classes were useful, 95% stated 'yes' (5% 'to a certain degree'). About the facilities for the course, 84.2% stated that they were suitable (15.8% 'to a certain degree'). The frequency of their visit to the website outside the classes ranged widely from never (10%), once (5%), a few times (30%), to every week (55%). Students commented on these various aspects of teaching as follows:

- The tutors made sure I understood everything before they continued.
- We could ask questions if needed and [I did] not feel that things were crammed.
- I felt that some weeks were rushed, I did not feel I got to grips with some concepts and felt I needed more.

For most questions related to the website, both groups' answers tend to be very favourable. 89.5% of blended learning students (as compared to 100% of distance learners) found the website was easy to use. Students also commented favourably on its interactiveness and efficiency.

For the question of whether the website worked well, more distance learners (90%) stated in the affirmative than blended learning students (73.7%). This seems to be attributable to the few instances where the website crashed during the lesson. Students pointed out as follows:

- Had a few problems in a couple of lessons where website was down and some people could not log on.
- At the beginning of the course there were a few problems with accessing the website inside the classroom.

Almost all the students (94.7% of the blended and 100% of the distance learners) agreed (or strongly agreed) that the website was easy to navigate. One student commented, 'the lessons were straightforward to click on'.

100% of the students from both groups agreed (or strongly agreed) that the instructions were easy to follow. One of the blended learning group said that they were easy to follow but still used the tutors' help to understand the instructions. One of the distance learners commented negatively ('some lessons were not quite clear to follow. Perhaps they could have been worded better'), although s/he agreed on their overall clarity.

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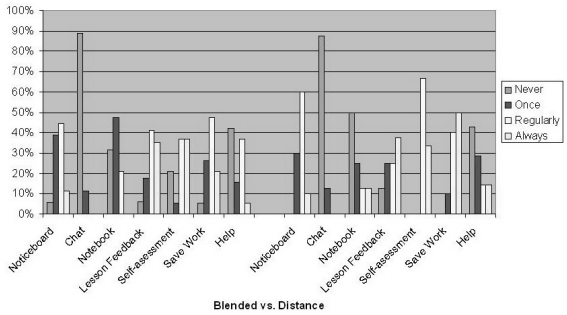


Fig. 4. Frequency of using website support facilities.

Again, almost all the students liked the layout/order of the activities (94.4% blended as compared to 90% distance). Blended learning students seemed to be more in the affirmative in their comments than the distance learners:

- They run in cohesion with each other.
- Some of the layout was arranged in a creative and professional way.
- *Good layout. Although it would be better to provide less reading and more written examples.*

A lower proportion of the students (83.3% of the blended and 80% of the distance) agreed (or strongly agreed) that the wording of the tutorials was easy to understand. As expected, students' opinions seemed to be varied on the appropriateness of the task difficulty level. 68.8% of the blended and 60% of the distance learners agreed (or strongly agreed) that it was appropriate, but 31.2 % (40% distance) did not think so.

Regarding the computer-provided feedback on their tasks, however, almost all students (93% blended/100% distance) agreed (or strongly agreed) that it was helpful.

The frequency with which learners used the website learning support facilities (Noticeboard, Chat, Notebook, Lesson feedback, Self-assessment, Save work, and Help) and the helpfulness of them are shown in Figure 4. Among these facilities, a noticeably higher proportion of the distance learners used 'Noticeboard', 'Save work' and 'Self-assessment', which seems understandable, considering the following: first of all, 'Noticeboard' was possibly the easiest source of information for them to learn of homework and other events as compared to teachers' announcements of them in class. The fact that 90% of the distance learners regularly used 'Save work' suggests that they might not have worked on the lessons at one sitting, in contrast to blended learning students. In addition, 100% of the distance learners regularly used the 'Self-assessment' facility, which suggests the importance of the provision of the self-monitoring facility on a distance learning course.

As regards the helpfulness of the above facilities (Figure 5), a noticeably higher proportion of distance learners thought that 'Noticeboard', 'Self-assessment', and 'Save work' were helpful but these learners did not seem to find 'Chat' or 'Notebook' very helpful. None of the distance learners found 'Chat' helpful and only 12.5% found 'Notebook' helpful. This suggests that distance learners' main form of communication

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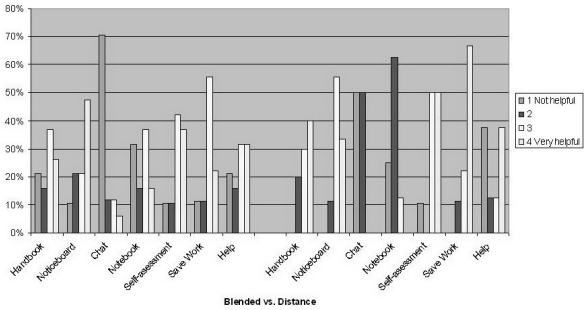


Fig. 5. Usefulness of website support facilities.

was the weekly phonecall they received from the project team.

Both groups of students seemed to find highlights, colours, fonts, tables and diagrams helpful, as can be seen in Figure 6. These uses of different colours and fonts for highlighting, and possibly more impressive tables and diagrams seem to be among the advantages of coloured documents in computer-mediated learning.

Overall, both groups of students showed their satisfaction with various aspects of the learning programme through favourable answers in the questionnaires.

4 Discussion

Despite both groups' self-perceived needs for help with various areas in academic English, revealed at the interview, student retention has proven a major problem in the distance delivery of the EAP programme in the study, with 50% of the distance learners dropping out of the course as compared to 13% of the blended learners. The reasons for leaving the course provided by two distance learners suggest that a non-credit-bearing distance learning course may be at the bottom of a student's priority list when their workload becomes heavier. The rest of the students said until the last minute that they would complete the course once they had dealt with other urgent business such as their credit-bearing course assignments. This might also be attributable to the difference in

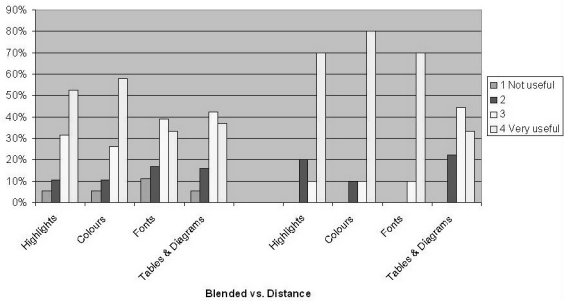


Fig.6. Usefulness of various website features.

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learners' commitment levels or motivation. Most of the blended learning students seemed to be more committed or motivated to complete the course. Their commitment level in terms of time might have been much higher than that of distance learners because they had to come to class every week for the duration of the course. In addition, understandably they could have a similar level of other commitments such as part-time work and degree coursework as distance learners. This suggests that the distance learners might not have been as committed to the course, or as highly motivated to complete it, as the learners in blended learning. This contrasts with the findings of Bisciglia and Monk-Turner's (2002) study, i.e. that distance students are more likely to be motivated. Personal contacts or interactions in the classroom between tutors and students or between students themselves might have contributed to sustaining the blended learning students' motivation, thereby resulting in a higher retention rate. Motivational aspects, as Sampson (2003) and Strambi and Bouvet (2003) have identified as an essential element to consider in distance learning, seem to have played an important role in student retention.

Students' attitudes towards using technology in learning were not directly investigated in the study. Some of the students, however, displayed their favourable attitude towards the use of technology in learning by commenting in the questionnaire, 'the computer made it easy to access and more fun as opposed to pen and paper'. On the other hand, others showed their preference for a combination of the new and old media by saying, 'the usage of the computers and the handouts were useful'. Several students also asked if they could have a paper copy of the learning materials. They did not seem to be satisfied with the web version only, although some of them liked the fact that they did not have to write by hand. It seems that the fear of having intangible learning materials still prevails. Some students were even worried about the expiry date for access to the learning materials. One of them wrote in the comments section, 'Hope it is also accessible after the EfE [course]'. This suggests that it might be preferable for the web-based programme to be accompanied by some tangible supplementary materials such as paper handouts or a CD-ROM.

On the negative aspects of using technology in learning, those who were not good at typing or were not very familiar with using the computer seemed to experience problems with this type of course. Those difficulties did not, however, present more serious challenges than the slower typing speed in completing tasks, since students were aware of the need for familiarity with the technology. Students of today cannot avoid the use of technology such as email and word-processing.

Students' achievement levels did not show any great difference between the distance and blended groups, which corroborate findings from other studies (Allen, Bourhis, Burrel & Mabry, 2002; Neuhauser, 2002). On the other hand, in the blended learning group there emerged a tendency towards higher achievement levels by the students who attended the classes more regularly. This seems to demonstrate that students' achievement levels on a course are more to do with their commitment to their learning than with the mode of delivery.

As regards students' satisfaction with the course, the distance learners in the current study showed a similar level of satisfaction to blended learning students, which is in line with other study results reporting distance learners' satisfaction (Allen *et al.*, 2002; Neuhauser, 2002). In particular, all ten completers in the distance group stated that their

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needs had been met on the course either fully (60%) or to a certain degree (40%). Unlike some studies (e.g. Sampson, 2003) reporting distance learners' dissatisfaction with the range and/or level of support they received, this particular group of distance students appeared to be reluctant to make use of the support available to them unless they were on the receiving end. That is, they liked receiving weekly phone calls from the project team but did not ring the tutors even when they needed to, as their comments below show:

- *Materials were provided for easy access online. Even though I was an online student I was contacted every week on the phone. This made me aware how much effort I need to put. It was successful.*
- *There were a few occasions where it might have been of use to me if I contacted tutors as there were a few lessons I did not really grasp.*

When asked about the reasons, students tended to blame their tight schedule for not making use of the support, as seen in the comments such as 'schedule was too tight and had lectures all day on my degree programme'.

Whilst some studies report the deep level of interaction (reflecting deep cognitive processing) in contrast to the surface level, among distance learners (Hara, Bonk & Angeli, 2000; Newman, Johnson & Cochrane, 1997), distance learners' interaction among themselves in this study was not noticeable. In addition, none of the distance learners used the 'Chat' facility on the website.

These differences in using support facilities and in interaction levels found between the current study and other studies may be attributable to the differences in the nature of the course. The course offered in the study was not a credit-bearing module, thus not part of their degree. Credit-bearing courses could introduce a system of counting students' participation in online discussions towards their overall grades to boost interaction levels, which system would not be as effective in non-credit-bearing courses. This might have discouraged the learners from trying to make the most of the course.

These positive results from both groups in terms of their achievement and satisfaction suggest that distance learning can be as successful or effective as blended learning, as long as distance students stay on the course to the end. Our task as educators therefore seems to come down to how to motivate distance learners to last the whole duration of the course.

5 Conclusions and further thoughts

The blended learning mode has proven to be more effective in student retention than the distance learning mode on this non-credit-bearing optional EAP course. Students' achievement and satisfaction with the course did not, however, show any great difference between groups, with both groups of learners achieving higher on their post-tests and giving favourable feedback on the programme.

Some thoughts are given to the problems which web-mediated blended or distance learning could encounter. First of all, using web-based materials can be problematic in the blended learning programmes. Problems can include website or internet service problems, for which teachers should always be prepared and have contingency plans for, such as preparing paper copies of the lesson materials. Technical problems can frustrate

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students and be a great source of embarrassment for teachers in class.

Special care for learners seems necessary for the success of distance programmes. That this particular group of distance learners did not make use of the support facilities available to them does not indicate that learners do not need these. The learners, however, seemed to want more to be on the receiving end than actively seeking to use these facilities. In addition to the support being available, therefore, it seems essential to provide more active support such as phonecalls for monitoring learning, and compulsory tutorials rather than optional.

More attention to details and careful design need to take place for distance courses. For example, a few distance students commented that there should be more answers to certain tasks besides the ones suggested. Blended learning students had the opportunity to show their answers to the tutors in class in case they differed from the suggested answers, but distance learners did not seem to actively do this (even though this could have been easily done by emailing their answers to the tutors). Facilities for students to send their answers to each task to tutors on the spot could therefore be very useful, in case there is more than one answer and they want to have tutors' feedback on their own answers. This could greatly increase interactivity or communication between distance students and tutors.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

1. What do you expect to gain from the EfE programme?

2. What are your biggest problems with academic English that you would like to get help with in this course?

3. Can you commit to a full programme of instruction?
   Yes *No*

4. Do you anticipate having any problem participating fully in this course? If YES, please explain.

5. Do you have any further questions?

   Interviewer's Notes

Appendix B: Questionnaires.

English For Excellence Programme Evaluation Questionnaire

Please circle the answer that most accurately reflects your opinion on the English for Excellence programme and explain your reasons wherever possible.
(Questions 4-7 and 9 were asked only of learners in blended learning)

1. Were your needs assessed at the start of the course?
   (a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

   Reasons:

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2 Has the course met your needs?
(a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

Reasons:

3 Do you feel that you have learnt useful Academic English skills?
(a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

Reasons:

4 Was the pace of the course appropriate for you?
(a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

Reasons:

5. Were the facilities suitable for the course?
(a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

Reasons:

6. Did you find the face-to-face classes useful?
(a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

Reasons:

7 Was the standard of the teaching good?
(a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

Reasons:

8. Did you find the feedback you received on your homework constructive?
(a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

Reasons:

9. How often did you visit the website outside of class? (please tick the appropriate box)

Never	Once	A few times	Every week

Reasons:

10. How often did you make use of the following? (please tick the appropriate box)

	Never	Once	A few times	Every week
EfE Handbook				
E-mail to tutors				
Phone call to tutor				
Wednesday tutorial				

Reasons:

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11. How useful did you find the following? (please tick the appropriate box)

	1 (not useful)	2	3	4 (very useful)
EfE Handbook				
E-mail to tutors				
Phone call to tutors				
Wednesday tutorial				

12. Have you been able to apply what you have learnt on the EfE programme on your degree coursework so far?
    (a) Yes (b) To a certain degree (c) No

    Reasons:

13. What would you change on the programme if you had the chance?

English for Excellence Website Evaluation

For each of the items below, please circle the number of the answer that reflects your opinion of the EfE website and lessons.

1. The content of the website is useful.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

2. The content of the website is relevant to my needs.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

3. The website is easy to use.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

4. The website works well.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

5. The website is easy to navigate.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

6. The instructions are easy to follow.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

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7. I like the layout and order of activities in each lesson.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

8. The wording of the lesson and tutorials is easy to understand.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

9. The tasks are of appropriate difficulty level.
   1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

   Comment:

10. The computer feedback I get on the tasks is helpful.
    1. I strongly agree 2. I agree 3. I disagree 4. I strongly disagree

    Comment:

11. Please rate the helpfulness of highlights, colours, fonts, tables and diagrams. Indicate your answer on a scale of 1 (not helpful) to 4 (helpful).

	1 (not helpful)	2	3	4 (helpful)
Highlights				
Colour				
Fonts				
Table & Diagrams				

12. I have used the following functions of the website (please tick)

	Never	Once	Regularly	Always
Noticeboard				
Chat				
Notebook				
Lesson feedback				
Self-assessment				
Saved work				
Help				

13. Please rate the helpfulness of the following functions. Indicate your answer on a scale of 1 (low) to 4 (high).

	1 (not helpful)	2	3	4 (helpful)
Noticeboard				
Chat				
Notebook				
Self-assessment				
Saved work				
Help				

Thank you for your time - The EfE team

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