Learning Skills in a Virtual Classroom

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Abstract
Most of the distance education institutions have progressed enormously in media-based distance education technologies and have adopted computer-mediated communication (CMC) for effective course delivery, learner support and student learning. A CMC-ELT blended model was developed as a standard model bearing in mind the field of English language teaching and taking into account the nature of the programme, the subject matter, profile of the students, the support facilities and educational technology available. In a virtual learning environment, students need specific competencies and access to internet. During the experimentation of CMC in English language teaching programmes, students’ learning styles, interaction, access were studied. The analysis of the data suggested that virtual learning environment is not less effective than the face-to-face learning environment rather it is more effective.

Keywords: e-learning skills, Computer-mediated communication, Teacher education, distance education

INTRODUCTION
Through Internet, the boundaries of the social interaction have changed. In face-to-face world each individual or group we interact has own distinct psychological quality. On the other hand, in an online environment interaction is more complex due to dynamics of cyberspace and the individual characteristics of the students. In cyberspace one can present him/herself in a variety of different ways. In the CMC-based environment, one can change his/her identity, personality, physical appearance, even gender. Generally, the username does not indicate one’s personality. However, in CMC-based classroom students are required to be truthful about their identity and they are also required to do their own work. They identify themselves when communicating online and follow the rules of online etiquette. After providing basic identity characteristics to e-tutors, students are free to choose how they wish the peers to perceive them in the classroom. So, if a student is a normally shy person in class and feels uncomfortable speaking in front of others, he/she may be more assertive in an online classroom. There are many students who don’t worry about their physical appearance and are free to express themselves. Online classroom provide another advantage to some of the students who don’t want to talk about their race or age. These characteristics are not evident in a CMC-based classroom (unless one shares) and thus some students feel free of prejudices. Lamy and Hampel (2007:77), after having an analysis of the previous researches argue that “students’ participation in synchronous written conferencing was comparable to that in oral class discussion, resulting in more turns and more language produced”. It is not only necessary for e-tutors to be trained in online teaching, the learners also need preparation. In CMC-based learning, students often feel compelled to engage with these new environments without being properly equipped with the basic skills required to be successful. “Web-based learning can be used to develop a wide range of academic skills and to accommodate a variety of approaches to teaching and learning” (Bates 2005:142). In fact, students are expected to have developed cognitive skills such as negotiation of meaning, life-long...
learning, reflective thinking and technical skills such as the basic use of computer-mediated technology, online social skills, online etiquette, web navigation and web searching.

**Objectives of the Study**
The objectives of the study were:

i. To analyse the competencies required for virtual learning
ii. To study learning styles of the students in virtual classroom
iii. To study the effects of online access, availability of tutors and materials.

**Research Question**

i. What are e-learning competencies required in Pakistani context?
ii. Do virtual environment affect learning styles of the students?
iii. Do online access to material and tutors facilitate in learning?

**RESEARCH METHOD AND TOOLS**

It was an experimental research conducted on the students enrolled in online courses of MA TEFL programme of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad Pakistan. The courses were offered through CMC-ELT Blended Model using Olive (Online institute of virtual education). The model provided a virtual environment for classroom discussion, forum, submission and feedback on the students’ assignments and projects. The feedback of the experimental group was sought through mid-term questionnaire, end-term questionnaire and focused group discussions.

**Sample**

In the first phase, a group of 27 students from four selected regions was selected randomly out of 644 students and in the second phase, another group of 25 students out of 420 students from all over the country were selected randomly. These students were enrolled in MA TEFL programme of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Pakistan.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Numerous studies and reports have documented the tremendous increase in the development and delivery of instruction through the use of computer-mediated communication technologies. Warschauer (1997:470) remarked that this rapid growth “arguably the fastest growth of any technology in history has caught the attention of language teachers”. In fact, most of the educational institutions, especially distance education institutions, have enthusiastically embraced these modes for delivering instruction which has resulted in a transformation as Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006:570) observed “distance learning and teaching have moved from the periphery to the center of university life”. In distance education context and research, the client is the major organizing principle which is tied in the transactional mode and the system perspective. It is noteworthy that “most research on learners and learning conducted over the last 10 years has focused on the individual, whether learning alone or in a group” (Gibson, 2003:149). Though it is a complex field but the researchers have identified many learning styles. Lifelong learning may be enhanced if “students are motivated to learn by understanding their learning style” (Cercene 2008:online). Motivation appears an important aspect in research focusing on independent study highlighted the relationships among learning outcomes and goals, motivation, and learning strategies employed by the individual learners. Research on learning styles is somewhat related and builds on a conceptual framework that suggests that matching teaching style and learning style will yield enhanced academic gains and persistence. Jochems, et.al. (2004:200) argue that “the traditional learner who is carefully guided through a well-defined curriculum is replaced by a life-long learner, who is self-directed
with regard to the selection of learning tasks and contents, the use of different media, and cooperation with teachers/tutors and peers”.

McPherson and Nunes (2004:83) termed online learning skills as “networked information and communication literacy skills (NICLS)”. These skills are required to succeed in the online learning process but will also exposed the students to such learning environment. NICLS are the traditional basic learning skills based on a new set of information and communication literacy skills which include “recognizing information needs, distinguishing ways of addressing gaps, constructing strategies of locating information, locating and accessing information and comparing and evaluating information, as well as organizing, applying and synthesizing information” (McPherson et.al. 2004:83).

The NICLS can be clearly divided into two main categories: computer-mediated communication (CMC) and information skills. CMC skills are related to the interaction of the student with the learning community whereas information skills are related to access to the learning resources and problems of information anxiety and overload. CMC is supposed to promote self-discipline and requires learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. However, there is the need to prepare students to use these technologies in the context of learning. Learners need to be skilled in technical and social aspects. Technical aspects include the technical skills needed to use CMC in an online learning situation - the ‘how to’ aspects of the course. For successful communication, the introduction of CMC into the learning environment generally requires changes and adaptations in human behaviour. “Students should be aware of crucial social factors involved in using CMC technologies such as: ignoring social boundaries, dealing with self-disclosure, flaming, guiding behaviour, adding cues to the communication (emoticons) and online etiquette (netiquette)” (McPherson 79-109).

The group dynamics in face-to-face environment also occur in CMC based environment which include communication patterns, group formation, group boundaries and sub-groups. But CMC-based groups are different due to special psychological features of cyberspace. Text-based communication, status equality, and the opportunity for altering or hiding one's identity are unique elements in the online group process. “The better in written communication, the more successful in an online environment” (Lynch 2004:53). The flexible boundaries also make asynchronous groups unique not only as compared to face-to-face groups, but in relation to online chat sessions as well. The tools available for synchronous and asynchronous communication allow students to participate in the ongoing virtual sessions at their own convenience and at their own pace. “Some of the unique features of asynchronous, typed-text communication also alter the interpersonal dynamics of the group, which offers the opportunity to better understand and improve how the group functions” (Clarke 2004:201-211).

DATA ANALYSIS
Students’ feedback was also sought through mid-term questionnaire (critical thinking skills), end-term questionnaire and focused group discussions. The responses of the students were analyzed statistically and presented in graphical from.

Analysis of the mid-term questionnaire
The responses of the students were analyzed in percentile. Description of the data is given below.
In response to the statement, ‘I think critically about how I learn’, most of the students, 48% & 30% in the first phase and 44% and the same number in the second phase of experiment, expressed their opinion in ‘often’ and ‘almost always’ categories respectively. The discussions in tutorials and forum developed critical thinking skills in the students which enabled them to reflect upon their own learning. They were taught how to teach English in their own environment and levels by modifying their teaching strategies. That was why, most of the students agreed to the statement.

In response to the statement, ‘I think critically about my own ideas’, most of the students, 41% & 37% in the first phase and 36% & 48% in the second phase of the experiment, expressed their opinion in ‘often’ and ‘almost always’ categories respectively. CMC-based learning environment and e-tutors were the main factors that motivated them to think independently and critically about their own ideas. Critical thinking of the students was also reflected in assignments and post-tests.
In response to the statement, ‘I think critically about other students’ ideas’, most of the students, 41% and 41% in phase I and 52% and 44% in phase II, expressed their opinion in ‘almost always’ and ‘often’ categories respectively. During the classroom discussions, the students critically evaluated and commented upon perception and teaching strategies of their fellow teacher-students. The data reflects that most of the students started thinking critically about their classmates ideas which were shared in the classroom.

In response to the statement, ‘I think critically about ideas in the readings’, 38% of the students agreed to the statement. Half of the students in Phase I did not express their opinion on this specific issue. The main reason for this low response was students’ lack of interest in extensive reading. Generally, the students are dependent on teacher’s notes but in CMC-based classroom, the tutor is a facilitator and the students have to read on their own. The researcher personally observed in the tutorials that most of the students came to the class unprepared and often the researcher had to ask them to study the relevant chunks for clarity of concepts and discussion in the classroom. However, the situation improved in the second phase of the experiment in which 72% students responded positively.
to the statement. The online environment provided opportunities to the students for reflective thinking as mentioned by most of the participants. They critically analyzed not only their own ideas but others’ ideas as well.

**Analysis of the End-Term Questionnaire**

**FIGURE 5**
**Course Objectives and Availability of Syllabus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree%</th>
<th>Unsure%</th>
<th>Agree%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course objectives were clear</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course objectives were appropriate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>96.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus was completely available online</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Majority of students was satisfied with the clarity and appropriateness of the objectives of the courses. Majority of the students in both the phases agreed to the points that the course objectives were clear and appropriate. They also expressed that the complete syllabus was available online. The objectives of the courses were to train English language teachers by providing them theory and practice of teaching English as a foreign language in local context.

**FIGURE 6**
**Organization of Course Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree%</th>
<th>Unsure%</th>
<th>Agree%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content was organized in modules/units/activities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course content was designed keeping in view different learning styles of the students</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of students were satisfied with the organization of the course material. According to the course objectives, the study material was available online in the form of units and was designed keeping in view English language teachers’ varied needs and levels of teaching.

Online education provided them better learning opportunities but an active community of learners through online interaction could not be created because the students faced problems in peer interaction as already mentioned. The course activities were appropriate and urged the students to use their research skills.

Students showed their concerns regarding active participation in online sessions and interaction among peers. Some of the students did not participate in the online discussions actively for the reasons that they had slow typing speed, bad connectivity, load-shedding and psychological issues. These factors affected their motivation to participate actively in online discussions. Besides these factors, social and cultural barriers hindered peer interaction. Different schedule of power supply failure (load-shedding) in different cities also affected schedule of online sessions. It also affected the motivational level of the students and
continuity of discussions in online session as the students were time and again logging in and out due to power supply failure in their areas. However, the comparison of both groups reflects that there was some improvement in interaction in the second phase of the study.

FIGURE 9
Flexibility of Online Communication

Most of the students felt comfortable in online communication and showed their willingness to get enrolled in such courses in future. The reasons might be the flexibility of online communication which helped them overcoming the problems of time management, travelling, and communicating with the tutors and peers. There were some problems in peer interaction during the first phase of the experiment. That is why, 7.4% of the students showed their disagreement and uncertainty regarding the statement that online learning was more motivating than a regular class as the communication in virtual classroom was written instead of verbal. Some of the students faced problem due to slow typing speed and poor connectivity. However, in the second phase of the study, all the students were satisfied on communicating with their tutor and most of them mentioned that they would like to recommend online courses to others.

FIGURE 10
Tutors’ Role in Online Discussions
All the students admitted that tutors initiated discussions, motivated them to participate and kept the discussions thematic during the online sessions. It means that tutors-students interaction was effective. They also acknowledged that the tutors had respect for each of them. Realizing the problem of power supply failure (load-shedding), the tutors arranged make-up tutorials to avoid administrative problem of 70% compulsory attendance in tutorials. Tutor arranged presentation of projects in face-to-face mode for two reasons; firstly, administrative requirement and secondly, to assess the performance of the students in comparison with the students studying in distance education mode. The students also acknowledged tutors’ attitude and concern in focused group discussions.

**FIGURE 11**

**Online Resources**

![Online Resources Graph](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree%</th>
<th>Unsure%</th>
<th>Agree%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study material was continuously updated.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online resources were current and relevant.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course tried to create a community of learners through online interaction.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the students mentioned that study material was not updated regularly and there were not enough interactive activities. The study material used in the study was approved by the Committee of Courses of the Department of English (AIOU) and it was not possible for the researcher to change it. Extra readings were added to the teaching modules by the tutors. However, the course contents need revision and addition of interactive activities.

**FIGURE 12**

**Assessment in CMC-based Programmes**

![Assessment in CMC-based Programmes Graph](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree%</th>
<th>Unsure%</th>
<th>Agree%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online presentations should be included in assessment of module training projects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students should be given option to appear online for end term exams.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be online and face-to-face assessment system.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students wanted assessment of their presentations and final examination through CMC-based instructions.
Most of the students were satisfied with the CMC-based instructions which brought them together from different places and levels. 96% students mentioned that CMC-based instructions helped them in managing their time and increased their experience in the field.

All the students suggested back up of online resources in the form of CDs so that they would be able to continue their studies in case of power supply failure (load shedding) and poor connectivity. They also suggested that new technologies like audio, video chats, mobile learning, etc. should be added to Olive to make it more effective.
Most of the students favoured online courses and they also favoured integration of CMC with distance education modules but they had certain apprehensions as well. The reasons might be the problems of power supply failure (load-shedding) and poor connectivity that they faced during their studies. They suggested a blend of online and face-to-face activities in distance education.

**Analysis of the Focused Group Discussions**

The purpose of the focused group discussions was to know and assess the responses of the students qualitatively about their CMC-based learning experience. Responses of the students in the focused group discussion were analyzed.

**Experience of being online student**

It was a great experience because the horizon was enlarged for me and it was quite contrastive to the first experience of the first semester in diploma TEFL because in that semester I used to take face to face tutorials and in the 2nd semester it was quite easy to be at home and then discussing the views that you do not know. So it was really a great experience for me and I came to know many new things. It was very interesting and positively resulting for me.

It is a great experience for me. It is quite interesting and at the same time it is quite convenient for me because I belong to a rural area of another district and it was quite difficult to come over here every week and attend the tutorials.

For me it was enlightening and enriching because I go to work at 8 and I come home at around 3 and then I am a mom as well so it is not only convenient but also enriching because online resources were unlimited and you could access information that the teachers recommended right away instead of going home and opening books and you had easy access to activities, to ways of the links that could enlighten us so for all in all it was a very enriching experience for me.

**CMC and learning styles**

What I have felt and I personally believe that language is all about communication what we attended the regular tutorials last semester I noticed that there too certain students who were not having enough confidence to ask the questions which were there in their minds. They were asking their peers, they were asking them to ask from the teachers, they were giving an outlet to...
confusions in their mind. But I think through online diploma courses every student must have given outlet to whatever confusions were there in his or her mind. They must have asked because they have the whole responsibility on their own shoulders so that was a totally different thing from the regular tutorials.

As far as my learning experience and my learning style is concerned, what I figure out that during regular tutorials which were not online the difference is between listening skills and reading skills I would say. Because in regular class sometimes if the tutor said something and the student does not understand it is not possible for the tutor many times to repeat verbatim what he or she just said but the same thing that in online chat what happened so that it was very easy to just roll up the chat part and to just read over again what the teacher had said very carefully so there was a beg advantage and that was a slight change in my learning style I guess.

It did not affect my learning style because I usually learn while having discussions. I do not feel easy to read books and access any notes to learn anything. I feel easy to learn during discussion and during that chat session I learn a lot from all the students. We are having different mind and every body’s opinion is different so I could learn many things from all other students and even our tutor as well so this was very helpful for me to attend this class and to learn a lot.

Peer Interaction

I think that it is a misconception actually when you are online you are actually with a group of people like mine sharing your ideas and giving their point of view and it is like your are in a company of so many people and it is not you ever feel isolated or lonely when you are chatting or taking online tutorials.

I believe that even in a face to face session in a class room full of people, a person can be isolated if he wishes to cut himself off by not participating in discussions or not interacting with the peers. It is your choice basically, if you wish to interact you may interact while be it online be it at a class room.

Problems and suggestions

First of all, the problem that all of us have faced that was regarding connectivity and the load on the website usually at the time of tutorial. I think the administration should increase the bandwidth of the site and this is totally a technical problem which they can solve and they can even give us a chance to have voice chat session. I think the students who cannot type well and who can not ask questions while typing from the tutors and they missed it at that time and having a voice chat session they can ask those questions from the tutor as well.

The major problem which I think all of us must have faced was that of electricity. Most of the time I start the class, I sit on the computer, I just enter the chat room and the light goes off. So I can’t do anything except looking at the face of the computer.

CONCLUSION

CMC can effectively be integrated with distance education when the study material fulfils requirements of the students by using proper learning management system. Keeping in view the above discussion, it was concluded that the study material was appropriate, relevant, and applicable to improve
the professional practices. Some of the students mentioned that study material was not updated regularly and there were not enough interactive activities. It was updated because the responses from majority of the students of both the groups in mid-term and end-term questionnaire reflected that the extra readings suggested by the tutors were current and relevant to their requirements. The content was relevant to the students’ interest, studies and professional development as it focused on teaching of four skills, classroom management, assessment, etc. They were developed in such a way that they catered to the needs of English language teachers in Pakistan.

It was revealed that tutor-student interaction was satisfactory but peer interaction was not satisfactory in the first phase. Measures were taken to develop online community of learners and it improved the situation in the second phase but it was not like a real life classroom. In distance education, there is always less teacher and peer interaction but CMC improved the situation by providing diverse opportunities for interaction as was evident from the responses of the students in the second phase of the study. So, CMC can effectively increase teacher-student and peer interaction in distance education system.

All the students expressed that they found CMC-based learning experience better as compared to existing distance education system in terms of learning, interaction, access, cost, etc. Majority of the students acknowledged that their learning improved in terms of performance in the examination. Also they had a wider exposure to learning resources in English language teaching around the world. CMC helped them to overcome their problems of travelling and time management; hence it improved their access to materials, tutorials, tutors and peers. They appreciated that CMC reduced their expenses on travelling, books, learning materials, assignments, postage, etc.

They also mentioned some problems in interaction with tutor and peers in the first phase, however, the situation improved in the second phase. Both the groups mentioned two major problems which were power supply failure and slow connectivity. All the students acknowledged that measures like makeup tutorials helped them to overcome these problems. In the CMC-based instructions, the responses of the students in both the discussions confirmed the findings of the data collected through document analysis, survey, mid-term and end-term questionnaires and results of the tests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Before designing a CMC-based study programme, some basic requirements should be considered. First of all, there must be a clear policy regarding implementation of CMC as it will provide a roadmap for defining objectives, methodologies, and roles of teachers and students. It will also change the approach towards course development and delivery methods. Secondly, it is important to identify the most appropriate, cost-effective, and sustainable media. Thirdly, development of content software should be suitable and cost-effective. Fourthly, orientation and training of the staff in the strategic, technical, and pedagogical dimensions of the process is necessary. Fifthly, financial support should be ensured for acquisition of hardware and software, installation and configuration, connectivity, maintenance and technical support.

In addition, both tutors and students need to develop the technical skills. Resource management is another aspect of CMC which may include investment in hardware and software, training, and curriculum development costs. A limitation in CMC-based written discourse is the reduction of social cues and this has led to the development of emoticons. Also the tutors should accommodate students’ individual learning styles into learning experiences.
REFERENCES


