

Challenges of Online Graduate-level Courses in English

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates how English as a Foreign Language (EFL)-speaking graduate students adjust themselves to online learning environments, particularly while they take an English-medium course in their native land. Content-based instruction (CBI) draws attention to the area of foreign language education since it can effectively enhance students' knowledge of a content area as well as improve their English fluency. Students who have never been exposed to online courses have to promote independent learning strategies in advance in order to contend with distance education. Therefore, EFL students who take online graduate-level courses in English are required to comprehend the contents of the course, participate in English class discussions, and deliver their thoughts in English, a foreign language to them. In addition to the demands of developing their autonomous learning strategies, students are obliged to maximize their use of reading and writing skills in English to communicate with each other. This paper is based on a case study of 17 Korean graduate students who took a web-based online class, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Methodology, which is mandatory for students who pursue their master's degree in the department of English at an open university. Data includes student interviews, tutor interviews, asynchronous written discussion messages, and a variety of class assignments. Based on interviews and observations with the participating students, it seems that they were vulnerable, at least in the beginning, to the stress of competing forces. They were forced to integrate with the new instructional environment of online education by attending an open university. Simultaneously, they were expected to enhance their English fluency. The discrepancy between their linguistic level and cognitive level was the biggest challenge. Due to the lack of English language ability, the students revealed their frustrations in expressing their thoughts in an asynchronous discussion forum although they confirmed that they had comprehended the academic subject matter. Nevertheless, they realized that they were English professionals who should improve their language skills in an EFL setting. Therefore, they were eager to expand their knowledge in their academic field of study and to promote their English proficiency. As they became accustomed to the course, they became more productive and creative in their writing and assignments. How to facilitate and maximize the advantages of content-based foreign language instruction in an online learning environment should be considered in further studies.

I. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking graduate students adjust themselves to online learning environments, particularly while they take an English-medium course in their native land. As the importance of continuous education is widely spread out, the number of students who take online classes rapidly increases since an online environment offers a flexible space for learning in time-wise and space-wise. Students are asked to adjust to new learning environments, specifically an online instructional medium of the Internet and asynchronous interaction with instructors and

peer-students. At the same time, the demand of studying in a foreign language (English in this study), to a certain extent, becomes another barrier for the non-native English-speaking students. Nevertheless, if EFL students make the most of online classes in English, they are able to extend their knowledge about the subject as well as to promote their English proficiency within their limited time and space, while they adjust to new linguistic and academic conventions of distance education.

II. Literature Review

Content-based instruction (CBI) draws attention to the area of foreign language education since it can effectively enhance students' knowledge of a content area as well as improve their English fluency. Short (1993) states that "in content-based instruction, language teachers use content topics, rather than grammar rules or vocabulary lists, as the scaffolding for instruction" (p. 629). Integration of a particular content area with the learning of a target language in content-based instruction aims to enhance students' knowledge of subject matters and foreign language skills (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Leaver & Stryker, 1989). According to Leaver and Stryker (1989) CBI as an instructional approach enables learners to acquire target language proficiency even if the focus of the course is the learning of subject matter.

Discussion forums in the online courses are different from face-to-face discussions in conventional offline classroom settings since they are asynchronous and delivered mainly in a written format. Therefore, graduate students who take web-based online courses have experienced inevitable role adjustments. Students who have never been exposed to online courses have to promote independent learning strategies in advance in order to contend with distance education. Extensive online learning necessitates individual time control and self-discipline of participants within the nature of online learning communication and interaction (Angeli, Valanides, & Bonk, 2003; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2004; Khine, Yeap, & Lok, 2003).

Therefore, EFL students who take online graduate-level courses in English are required to comprehend the contents of the course, participate in English class discussions, and deliver their thoughts in English, a foreign language to them. In addition to the demands of developing their autonomous learning strategies, students are obliged to maximize their use of reading and writing skills in English to communicate with each other.

III. Methodology

This paper is based on a case study of 17 Korean graduate students who took a web-based online class, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Methodology, which is mandatory for students who pursue their master's degree in the department of English at an open university. A case study approach was selected because it aims to "gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). The reason I pursue qualitative research in this study is that I am interested in listening to and observing participants' own experiences which reflect their thoughts and practices simultaneously. How the participants negotiate their own academic adjustments in an online learning environment as well as in a new linguistic setting of taking an English-

medium course is the main research question to pursue in this research. Qualitative research is based on the assumption that the meaning of individual phenomena plays as a whole and results embedded in people's experiences (Merriam, 1998).

This case study utilizes individual interviews with each participant to provide data on characteristics of independent learning strategies and self-discipline in online learning environments. Since the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Methodology course was taught in a target language of learning, specifically English, even though these 17 students are all native Korean-speaking students who work in the professional field of English, the advantages and disadvantages of content-based instruction are also discussed. Data includes student interviews, tutor interviews, asynchronous written discussion messages, and a variety of class assignments.

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

1. New Mode of Communication

The nature of the asynchronous written communication mode in online learning tends to lead to larger amounts of messages (Angeli et al, 2003; Garrison et al., 2004; Khine et al., 2003; Pawan et al., 2003). Every participant in the study develops various strategies to post and respond to online discussions in order not to be overwhelmed by their peers' postings. Peltz (2004) states that interactivity is "the heart and soul of effective asynchronous learning" (p. 37). Nevertheless, promoting interactivity among classmates is relatively problematic. Target language deficiency of participants and lack of interaction between the instructor and the students and among students themselves are dual obstacles to overcome to lead the successful web-based course. Due to the nature of online learning environments, the structures of the course should be well organized in order to help students strengthen their interdependence and engagement in their discussion mode.

2. Increased Level of Learner Self-Discipline

EFL speaking graduate students take advantage of online learning characteristics like flexibility and autonomy to promote their independent leaning strategies because extensive online learning necessitates individual time control and self-discipline within the nature of online learning. Peltz (2004) insists that "the learner is, for the most part, in charge of what gets learned" (p. 33). Based on interviews and observations with the participating students, it seems that they were vulnerable, at least in the beginning, to the stress of competing forces. They were forced to integrate with the new instructional environment of online education by attending an open university. Simultaneously, they were expected to enhance their English fluency. The discrepancy between their linguistic level and cognitive level was the biggest challenge. Due to the lack of English language ability, the students revealed their frustrations in expressing their thoughts in an asynchronous discussion forum although they confirmed that they had comprehended the academic subject matter. Nevertheless, they realized that they were English professionals who should improve their language skills in an EFL setting. Therefore, they were eager to expand their knowledge in their academic field of study and to promote their English proficiency. As they became accustomed to the course, they became more productive and creative in their writing and assignments. How to facilitate and maximize the advantages of content-based foreign language instruction in an

online learning environment should be considered in further studies.

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About the Presenter

Yunjoo Park is an assistant professor in the department of English Language and Literature at Korea National Open University. She received her Ph.D. in Language Education, specialized in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Indiana University, Bloomington. Her teaching and research interests mainly include: Content-Based Instruction, Learner Autonomy, and Computer-Assisted Language Learning.

