E-Learner Characteristics and E-Learner Satisfaction: A Study of Taiwanese EFL University Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at furthering the understanding of the potential effects of e-learner characteristics on e-learner satisfaction in an EFL context. Specifically, it examined the collective impact of computer anxiety, computer-mediated communication (CMC) apprehension, metacognitive self-regulation strategy use, mastery goal orientation, and performance goal orientation on EFL e-learner satisfaction. Multiple regression analyses revealed that not all university EFL students are satisfied with e-learning English courses; only students with high levels of metacognitive self-regulation strategy use, high levels of mastery goal orientation, and a low degree of CMC apprehension are satisfied with e-learning English courses. Results imply that online English instructors need to find ways to help students develop these characteristics.

Keywords: Computer Anxiety, Computer-Mediated Communication Apprehension, E-Learner Satisfaction, Goal Orientation, Metacognitive Self-Regulation Strategy Use

INTRODUCTION

Some language teachers in Taiwan have introduced computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the form of distance courses in language classrooms without having a good understanding about its benefits and limitations, hoping that this technology could create a new possibility for language teaching and learning. Although online English learning has drawn special attention from adult learners in Taiwan for its geographical and temporal convenience, course-on-demand design, and individualized and self-paced learning, not all English learners who achieve in the traditional classroom are satisfied with online learning environments and continue to take web-based English courses. Students’ e-learning satisfaction tends to be a strong factor in predicting course dropout rate and intention to take additional e-learning courses (Arbaugh, 2000; Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). Therefore, before requiring students to participate in e-language learning, teachers should be aware of key factors contributing to e-learner satisfaction. Different studies in the literature have identified several key factors influencing e-learner satisfaction, including learner characteristics (Chen, Wang, & Bagaka, 2003; Joo et al., 2000; Kanuka & Nocente, 2003).
2003), instructor characteristics (Hong, 2002), technology factor (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002), and features of web-based courses (Arbaugh, 2000); however, most of these studies have been conducted outside the second language/foreign language (SL/FL) context. The present study, conducted in an EFL e-learning environment, focused on e-learner characteristics, including computer anxiety, computer-mediated communication (CMC) apprehension, metacognitive self-regulation, and goal orientation, and deeply explored their relations to e-learner satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The four characteristics of computer anxiety, CMC apprehension, metacognitive self-regulation, and goal orientation have not been fully explored in previous studies, particularly with language learners. This review of literature provides a brief overview of previous findings that address the influence of e-learner characteristics on e-learner satisfaction. (For a more in-depth review, see Author, 2010.)

The concepts of computer anxiety (Igbaria & Parasuraman, 1989), CMC apprehension (Fuller, 2006), metacognitive self-regulation strategies (Pintrich, 2000b), goal orientation theory (Ames, 1992; Pintrich, 2000a), and e-learner satisfaction (Wang, 2003) were reviewed for this study as the basis to frame e-learner satisfaction in the English e-learning context.

Computer Anxiety

Computer anxiety is a psychological construct that has drawn much attention from researchers (Havelka, Beasley, & Broome, 2004). A commonly accepted definition of computer anxiety is: the fear of computers when using the computer, or when considering the possibility of computer use (Heinssen et al., 1987). Fajou (1997) elaborated this definition by adding that computer anxious people may suffer from the feeling of frustration, embarrassment, failure, and disappointment while using computer. E-learners with high levels of computer anxiety might encounter more difficulties and emotional frustration in online classes compared with their counterparts with lower levels of computer anxiety.

Computers are media tools in e-learning environments and fears of computer usage would certainly hamper learning satisfaction (Piccoli et al., 2001). Previous studies seem to support this assumption. Brown, Fuller, and Vician (2002), for example, found that computer anxiety has a negative association with students’ use, performance outcomes, and satisfaction while working with a computer. In addition, Buche, Davis, and Vician’s (2007) longitudinal study to detect the effects of computer anxiety on performance in the context of using computers intensively found that individuals with a high level of computer anxiety tended to receive a lower final grade, and a reduction in anxiety was associated with a higher final course grade.

The sample studies mentioned above were conducted outside the language learning context. Lewis and Atzert (2000) undertook a qualitative study analyzing the performance of a class of German students participating in project-oriented CALL trials for three years. In this CALL class, participants were required to publish their projects in a website on the Internet. They claimed that CALL classes which use new computer technologies extensively can also create anxiety and frustration for some learners. This anxiety may inhibit their language acquisition. Lewis and Atzert also suggested that computers can compound existing fears of failure in relation to learning a foreign language, producing what Scovel (as cited in Lewis & Atzert, 2000) has termed “debilitating anxiety.” Clearly, if foreign language classroom anxiety is already a serious problem for EFL learners, the added stress of using computer technology in the foreign language learning could increase the burden of language learners. Therefore, this study considers computer anxiety an important factor in EFL e-learner satisfaction.

CMC Apprehension

Wrench and Punyanunt-Carter (2007) defined CMC as any communication that occurs on the
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