Minding the Gap Between First and Continued Usage of a Corporate E-Learning English-language Program

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of computer on-line English-language learning (COEL) (acronyms given in the Appendix) programs in business contexts remains an unexplored area in the computer assisted language learning literature. Moreover, while many studies have focused on learners’ first usage intentions in TAM (technical acceptance model), few have explored their intentions to continue using them. To address this lacuna, the authors propose a framework for COEL derived from a three-month empirical study of learners’ perceived ease of use (PEOU), perceived usefulness (PU), perceived enjoyment (PENJ), attitudes towards corporate e-learning (ATT), intention (INT), technology satisfaction (SAT), and affective reaction (AR) regarding a COEL program implemented at a financial firm in Taiwan. An examination of the proposed two models revealed gaps between learners’ intention of first usage and re-usage of the COEL. Further analyses revealed a significant difference between groups of high intention learners to re-use the COEL and low intention learners to re-use the COEL. A second investigation determined eight factors that contributed to the differences between these two diverse groups of learners. This study’s findings shed light on the relationship between TAM model and factors related to COEL programs.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Language Learning, Corporate On-Line English Learning, Perceived Ease of Use, Perceived Enjoyment, Perceived Usefulness, Users’ Attitudes, Users’ Intentions, Users’ Reactions

1. INTRODUCTION

As English continues to solidify its position as the lingua franca of the Internet, academics, and international commerce (Flowerdew, 2003; Swales, 1997), it is not an overstatement to say that a firm’s chances of survival in future years will be directly linked to the aggregate English proficiency of its workforce (Vollmer, 2001; Seidlhofer, 2001). Therefore, it is not
surprising that companies the world over are scrambling to implement English-language teaching programs to improve their employees’ English ability (Kaufmann, 2006).

Coupled with this rising importance of English, recent developments in software design, the availability of personal computers, and the dawn of the Web 2.0 era have led to the creation of literally thousands of English-language learning software programs, courseware, online courses, learning management systems, and hybridized packages. According to Levy and Stockwell (2006), computer assisted language learning (hereafter, CALL) designers typically design their programs either according to the four major English-language skills of speaking (e.g., Harless, Zier, & Duncan, 1999; Salaberry, 1996), listening (e.g., Hew & Ohki, 2001; Jones, 2004), reading (e.g., Brandl, 2002; Walz, 2001), and writing (e.g., Dodigovic, 2002; Nerbonne, 2000) and/or “languages areas” (p. 21), such as pronunciation (e.g., Hincks, 2003; Weinberg & Knoerr, 2003), grammar (e.g., Heift, 2004; Reuer, 2003), vocabulary (e.g., Tsou, Wang, & Li, 2002; Nesselhauf & Tschichold, 2002), and discourse (e.g., Kramsch & Anderson, 1998).

This wealth of studies conducted on CALL reveals much about the increasing availability and increasing complexity of CALL program design; moreover, they bespeak the myriad decisions and challenges encountered by those in charge of creating and implementing CALL programs. However, to the authors’ knowledge, this ever-increasing body of CALL literature has failed to address the potential role that CALL English-language learning (COEL) programs play in the corporate context.

A rare exception to this lack of attention to “business COEL” in the literature were the Sprache und Beruf Conference held in Germany and the China International Conference on Online English Education in 2005. According to Kaufmann (2006), the three major themes that derived from the Sprache and Beruf conference were that: 1) E-learning is growing as an alternative for traditional training programs for the teaching of business English in the workplace; 2) many organizations allow employees to study business English during working time but most employees fail to do so because they prefer to learn English on their own time away from work; and 3) employees involved in company-sponsored business English courses usually spend little more than one hour a week studying on their own.

Moreover, Cotteral (2005), speaking at the latter conference in China, maintained that e-learning is an alternative to traditional corporate language programs due to its flexibility, lower costs, and results-oriented design. Despite these advantages, existing e-learning COEL models and many leading COEL e-learning providers have experienced a rapid drop-off rate amongst learners due to a variety of factors that have, heretofore, not been explored in the business e-learning context (Cotteral, 2005; Kaufmann, 2006; Richen, 2005).

The purpose of the present study is to address the aforementioned lacunae in the literature by investigating the factors that influence business COEL learners’ intentions of utilizing corporate e-learning English-language learning and teaching programs. Our study comprises of two components. First, we develop and test a COEL framework on the basis of reasoned action theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) (TRA) by integrating the Attitude towards Corporate E-learning (ATT), Intention to Use Corporate E-learning (INT), PEOU and PU in the TAM model, perceived enjoyment, Satisfaction (SAT) and Affective Reaction to E-learning (AR). This framework was designed to help explain how learners’ perceptions affect their intentions to re-use COELs and to ascertain stronger causal rationales behind the observed relationships. Second, we attempt to identify potential gaps between users’ INT of first use (INT-FU) and re-use (INT-RU) by conducting interviews and quantitative analyses to determine the critical factors that may lead to gaps therein. We considered Taiwan to be an ideal site for the present study because it is a rapidly-developing country whose future economic and political survival depends largely on its ability to improving the English-proficiency of its workforce (Ministry of Education, 2006). Therefore, to study the
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