

Assessing students' preferences regarding their  
asynchronous study activities online

Final report

Sérgio Luiz de Moraes Ferreira

27 March 2017

## Table of Contents

1. Practical context.....	1
2. Overall aims of research .....	1
3. Background reading .....	1
4. Methodology .....	2
5. Findings and discussion .....	3
6. Conclusions and recommendations.....	5
References.....	7
<b>Appendix 1</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Appendix 2</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Appendix 3</b> .....	<b>13</b>

## 1. Practical context

The students involved in this research are highly educated, work in high-powered jobs and live in a cosmopolitan city (São Paulo). They are young adults in the intermediate to upper-intermediate levels (CEFR B1-B2), and have had a significant amount of experience as learners of a foreign language in reputable institutions in Brazil, e.g. Associação Alumni, Associação Cultura Inglesa and the University of São Paulo, and abroad, e.g. Malvern House in London, PGIC Vancouver and some other schools in the USA. The lessons are in-company, but the students usually come from different departments within the company, and do not normally know each other. They buy their course independently and directly from the school, and do not have to report their results to the company. This means they have chosen to study at our institution without any apparent pressure from their employer.

The course comprises 34 lessons of 1h20, with students meeting twice a week for about 4 to 5 months. We follow coursebooks available in the market, from publishers such as CENGAGE, Oxford and Cambridge University Press. A computer and data projector is available in every room. Assessment consists of online quizzes in the first and third months of the course, and a written test in the second and fourth months, plus an oral presentation at the end of the term.

Considering Hockly's (2015:232) definition of digital literacy as "the technical skills and social practices needed to effectively interact with digital technologies", I believe these learners are highly digitally literate. Curiously, considering the topic of this research, about half of them work in the IT department of their company. When asked if they are enthusiastic about technology and computers in general, their answers varied from "I'm not so enthusiastic but I accept it as a way to make my life easier" to "technology is everything in my life" and "it's my job!", with a total of 80% of the students expressing approval of it.

Regarding their language learning needs and wants, they say fluency and accuracy are their goals, with speaking and writing being the most important skills to be developed, considering their professional needs, e.g. business presentations, writing reports, etc. They also worry about grammar, saying they can tell when something they say or write is wrong, but they don't really know why - typical behaviour of learners in the intermediate level, in my experience.

## 2. Overall aims of research

My aim was to investigate my students' perceptions of what type of course activities done online helped them most in their learning, so that I might use this information to suggest improvements to the Online Component of the course. These results may also help me to be better able to integrate the activities done in class and the ones online, which might make learners more motivated to use the resources available.

Rather than hypothesis-testing, I believe I am hypothesis-generating. With my research, I would like to find answers to these questions: what do my students really do while working with the asynchronous online element of our course? What helps them most? Can they explain why and how it helps them? Can this information help other learners and teachers?

## 3. Background reading

According to Sharma (2016:33) blended learning combines "the positives of classroom teaching with the advantages of online learning, considered to be studying at your own pace, at a place of your choice; and 'differentiation' – using the platform as a way of delivering personalized, individual learning". Along similar lines, Hockly (2010:6) argues that "combining online elements with f2f

elements means that learners do even better than in purely f2f learning”.

There is growing support for the claim that technology by itself will not do the job. Blake’s views rest on the assumption that “...no particular technology is superior to any other tool; it’s all in the way the activities are implemented so as to engage and foster the student’s own sense of agency”. (2013:XIV) Hockly (2011:2) puts forward the claim that “bad teaching with technology is still bad teaching”. Arguably, having access to technology is not enough. It has to be integrated wisely, so it complements the work done in class.

In an OECD study, Hattie and Yates are quoted as having reported “stronger effects when computers were supplementing traditional teaching, rather than seen as its alternative”. According to these authors, “positive effects were achieved in interventions that followed the same principles of learning that apply for traditional teaching as well: computers were particularly effective when used to extend study time and practice” (Hattie and Yates 2013 quoted in OECD 2015:163). This seems to be a characteristic of the material provided by my institution, which seems to follow the work done in class seamlessly, as a real extension and consolidation.

King (2016:7) makes the case for deeper learning as a positive outcome of blended learning, for it affords learners the opportunity to “watch a video or listen to an audio text as many times as possible without feeling inadequate”, or to read a text quickly to get the gist “without feeling rushed” or, on the contrary, take one’s time to reflect on a text “without feeling slow”.

Means et.al. (2013:36), on the other hand, propound the view that the positive results of blended learning may arise not just from the blending of online and offline elements, but from “different kinds of learning activities” and the fact that blended learning tends to “involve more learning time, additional instructional resources, and course elements that encourage interactions among learners”.

Drysdale et.al. (2013:13) claim that learners prefer blended classes to traditional face-to-face ones, citing a survey of 163 undergraduate students whose most common reasons included “the ability to complete coursework at their own convenience, the increased time for other activities ... and the freedom that goes along with hybrid classes” (Olson 2003 quoted in Drysdale et.al. 2013:13).

Tomlinson (2013:221) puts forward the view that learners in General English classes do not usually “get enough exposure to the language in use and ... do not get enough opportunities to communicate nor to make discoveries about the language for themselves”. In his words, “only those learners with the motivation and opportunities to seek language experience outside the classroom manage to actually acquire communicative competence in the target language”. The author argues that blended learning courses are one solution to this problem, especially if “they follow up work done face-to-face in order to provide online opportunities for exposure, discovery and use”. Tomlinson also says that “such experiences can help the General English student to become less dependent on teachers and more self-reliant both during the course and in subsequent language learning experiences”.

Regarding learners’ satisfaction with blended learning systems, Chen et.al. (2016:1670) develop the claim that a critical factor is ease of use. Their argument is that a system’s ease of use encourages learners “to devote their attention to learning the content” instead of having to make an effort to understand how the system works.

## 4. Methodology

I have followed a synthetic approach (which aims to capture the whole phenomenon) rather than an analytic one (which focuses on an aspect of the phenomenon), with a holistic perspective and heuristic (descriptive) objectives (Seliger and Shohamy 1989:27). The small size of the subject population (25 students) might increase the effect of individual variability.

With a view to selecting the questions of the questionnaire (which I have used for internal validity and retrievability), informal interviews were conducted throughout the course, in which my students answered general questions about the topic in question, and some other questions that arose from my reading on the subject. I took advantage of every opportunity I had to collect information: just before assigning homework, when we were discussing technology or a related topic, when checking homework assigned, just before or after a test or quiz, etc... My objective when asking these questions was to get them to relate the Online Component to the activities at hand, e.g. "How can the Online Component help you with this task? Have you used it before with this purpose in mind? Did it help you then? How?" Afterwards, I would take notes of the students' comments on a notebook or on my phone, or I would sometimes record the interview on my phone.

The questionnaire (appendix 1) covered topics such as how long and where they had studied English, if they were enthusiastic about technology and computers, what resources they used outside of class for practice (besides the institution's self-study Online Component), what they relied on for support if they needed help with the activities in the Online Component, what parts of the Online Component they preferred (Homework assigned? Consolidation activities?), what could be added or changed and if they felt the level of challenge was adequate.

Due to the fact that questionnaires "involve a somewhat superficial and relatively brief engagement with the topic on the part of the respondent" (Dornyei 2007:105), I had them printed and the students were asked to fill them in in class, so that they would be able to discuss the questions and come up with more ideas as a group, consequently spending more time with it.

Initially, I also intended to use the WhatsApp mobile app and Facebook as tools for collecting data for the project, but as I work inside banks, I was not able to access the Internet in the classroom - security is a major concern. I had to rely on screenshots of the material being worked on (appendix 2) to refer to it while in class. Looking for an alternative, I also tried unsuccessfully to get students to use their mobile phones or tablets in class, but they either seemed reluctant to spend the data of their mobile plan or the network signal was too weak and therefore the Internet browsing too slow. Thus, I came to the conclusion that I could not rely on using the web in class, either for our regular lessons or for the research project.

## **5. Findings and discussion**

The majority of the students in this study are young professionals in their early thirties, and they are evenly divided gender-wise. Considering their profile (busy professionals, under stress at work, without much time for course-related work outside of class), I was pleasantly surprised by how much of what was proposed as homework in the Online Component they actually completed (appendix 3). On average, students spent a total of 6 hours online, with some having spent a total of almost 20 hours using the Online Component within the semester we were together.

Students reported that the online component provides great support when they have to be absent, by showing the content of any given lesson (course-book pages), including the audio files for the listening activities done in the class and the homework assigned.

Considering their answers to the questionnaire, most students agree that recent developments in technology have made it easier to practice their English outside of class, and their most frequent activities are watching movies and series with or without subtitles and doing the homework assigned in the course, including the Online Component, though some complained about the fact that the Online Component was still only available as a website, as it had not yet been made into an app. Some students also mentioned they made use of apps such as Duolingo and English Live, a podcast (<https://www.allearsenglish.com/>) TED videos, ITNews (<http://www.itnews.com/>) and a BBC app (not specified).

Virtually all the students rely on the Google Translate tool for help when doing the activities on the Online Component, which probably means that our self-study tool could perhaps do with a bit more of just-in-time support, i.e. “the explanation or information not only that they need but also when they need it, as often as they need it and in context” (King 2016:6). For example: some learners mentioned in the questionnaire that they missed a sort of “grammar reference box” within the activities themselves. Most learners also rely on their course-books for help, and some of them will consult an English-English or English-Portuguese dictionary. One student mentioned the Linguee site (<http://www.linguee.com/>) as an alternative for help.

In their comments on the similarities and differences between the work done in class and the work done at home via the Online Component, here are some points the learners made:

1. “the f2f part is still the most important part because it represents real communication; the online part is just consolidation”
2. “the class work is more productive, as there is more interaction, and things seem more real”
3. “the class work is like an overview of what has to be studied in more depth at home”
4. “it is easier to understand when the teacher explains it in the classroom”
5. “there is more conversation in class”
6. “in class we get guidance, culture, explanations, and online we can improve and consolidate what was seen in class”
7. “the Online Component is especially useful when we miss classes”
8. “the Online Component is an extension of the class”
9. “at home it is easier to research and focus on our weaknesses”

Overall, the Online Component activities they reported having enjoyed the most were:

1. “fill in the blanks” (4x) - cloze texts dealing with lexis and grammar
2. “the ‘missed class’ (2x) and ‘homework’ sections” (3x) - which showed what had been covered in class, in case they had been absent
3. “listening” (5x)
4. “grammar” (3x)
5. the “consolidation” section (9x)

The substitution drill, part of the consolidation section, in which students can record their voices and compare them to a model, was also a popular activity, though not their favourite. Here are some of their comments:

1. “it’s not easy to use”
2. “we should be able to record our voices more than once”
3. “the sentences are too long”
4. “the user should be able to control the time allowed for the recording”
5. “I cannot use it on my phone”
6. “it’s too fast”
7. “not really practical – they are just phrases that do not develop my listening”
8. “it requires a microphone, which I do not have”
9. “I cannot make it work on my Mac” (2x)
10. “I don’t feel comfortable using it, it’s so strange the dynamic (sic) and I don’t like to listen to my voice”

The students found that Reading and Writing were the skills emphasized overall in the activities in the Online Component.

When asked to suggest changes or features to be included in the Online Component, these are some of their ideas:

1. a chatbot
2. videos related to the lessons
3. recommendations of books for their level
4. turn it into an app
5. teachers could start an activity in class and have students finish it at home (flipping it?)
6. all the material could be in just one place, and it could be easier to find things (content is currently organised in lessons following the days of classes, i.e. “Day 1”, “Day 2”, not “Present Perfect” or “Articles”)
7. fill-in-the-blank activities should not have gaps of different sizes, which are an indication of what word is needed, i.e. small gap = small word, big gap = long word
8. conference calls among students and teachers at set times

In general, the level of challenge was considered to be adequate, and they reported that there was enough instruction given in class for the Online Component tasks.

Students were asked if the activities in the Online Component should be made compulsory and graded, and only a third of the group responded affirmatively.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The students really do value the self-study online resource provided by their school, even with all the flaws outlined by them in the questionnaire. Nonetheless, it seems to me that one cannot ignore the technological gap between the Online Component and the competition, i.e. the apps, games and software one may assume our clientele have contact with regularly. For them, the stark differences between the games and apps they use and the Online Component are apparent. If we are to provide such a tool to our clients, it is of the utmost importance that we make use of state-of-the-art software design, though we have to keep in mind that “such decisions should be pedagogy-led rather than technology-led” (McCarthy 2016:3). Given their comments and suggestions above, one wonders how much progress would be made if the students themselves were asked to contribute to the development of these tools, both in terms of ideas and design.

Analysing some of my students’ comments, I can say that some of them yearn for agency, which is part and parcel of their regular user-generated content online experience, and they seem to feel a lack of learner-content interaction, for instance when they ask for more control over the tasks: “the user should be able to control the length of time allowed for the recording...”

The importance of clear, thorough, frequent and engaging f2f instruction is clear, and I especially liked the comment a student made that he or she feels that the class work gives them “just an overview”, and that when they go online, they can consolidate and go further.

The amount of technology available nowadays is astounding, yet it is not always reliable. We still sometimes struggle to send a file over the network on our mobile devices, WI-FI is not 100% dependable, and not all learners have embraced technology or are willing to use it in class. A former tutor of mine used to say that “teaching” means “anticipating problems”, and if something goes wrong in our everyday practice when using technology, it usually compromises the entire activity and learners end up feeling quite frustrated.

Cambridge University Press (2016:2) conducted some action research in which they asked teachers to contribute answering, among others, the question “What will be important in Adult ELT in five years’ time?” Not surprisingly, of the 11 ideas that came up in the research, 6 refer to technology or digital content, and they are as follows:

- Personalised / customised learning ... and not just digital!
- Effective co-existence of digital and traditional – creating a solution that is simple and works
- Cost-effective digital tools for institutions
- Content that is suitable for mobile-based learning
- Communicative digital (LMS) activities, such as games and forums
- Optional digital content

I believe most of these ideas also came up in the interviews and the questionnaire I conducted, or were found in the literature I analysed, providing confirmatory evidence that further research is needed.

## References

- Cambridge University Press. (2016). *Research in Action Session: What will English Language Teaching look like in five years' time?* Retrieved from: <http://image.emarketing.cambridge.org/lib/fea415707566037c75/m/2/Research+in+Action+session+report.pdf>
- Blake, R. J. (2013). *Brave new digital classroom: Technology and foreign language learning*. Georgetown University Press. p. XIV
- Chen, W. S., & Yao, A. Y. T. (2016). An Empirical Evaluation of Critical Factors Influencing Learner Satisfaction in Blended Learning: A Pilot Study. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 4(7), 1667-1671.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Drysdale, J. S., Graham, C. R., Spring, K. J., & Halverson, L. R. (2013). An analysis of research trends in dissertations and theses studying blended learning. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 17, 90-100
- Hockly, N. (2015) Digital literacies. IN Council, B. Innovation in English Language Teacher Education. Pp. 232-236
- Hockly, N., & Clandfield, L. (2010). *Teaching online: Tools and techniques, options and opportunities*. McHenry, IL: Delta Publishing.
- Hockly, N., & Waters, A. (2011). *Tweeting is for the birds—not for language learning*. Retrieved from: <http://eltj.org/iateflbrighton.pdf>
- King, A. (2016). *Blended language learning: Part of the Cambridge Papers in ELT series*. [pdf] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- McCarthy, M. (2016). *Blended Learning*. In: McCarthy, M. (ed.) *The Cambridge Guide to Blended Learning for Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press
- Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., & Baki, M. (2013). The effectiveness of online and blended learning: A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Teachers College Record*, 115(3), 1-47.
- OECD (2015). *How Computers are Related to Students' Performance*, in *Students, Computers and Learning: Making the Connection*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Seliger, H. W., & Shohamy, E. G. (1989). *Second language research methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, Pete. (2016) Blended Learning: Where are we now? Where are we going? *Revista New Routes*. São Paulo, 60, p. 32-35, October.
- Tomlinson, B., & Whittaker, C. (2013). *Blended Learning in English Language Teaching*. London: British Council.

## Appendix 1

### Students' Perceptions of the Online Component

This questionnaire is part of a research project sponsored by Associação Alumni São Paulo and Cambridge University Press, which aims to collect your perceptions of the Online Component of the course. Please answer in English, but feel free to use Portuguese if you'd like. In no way will the comments given here affect your results in the course. Thank you so much for taking part!

Sponsored by:

**alumni**

best in class

Sponsored by:



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

1. Describe your language learning history, i.e. how long you have been studying English, places where you have studied, certificates you have acquired, etc...

4 YEAR WHEN I WAS KIDS CCAA, CNA, WIZARD  
2 YEAR PARTICULAR CLASS 2009 UNTIL 2011  
2 YEAR AT CELL LEP 2012 UNTIL 2014  
2 YEARS AT ALUMNI 2015 UNTIL 2016

2. How enthusiastic about technology, computers, etc... are you?

I REALLY THINK IT IS GOOD AND CAN HELP A LOT TO LEARN SOMETHING.

3. Do you feel that recent developments in technology have made it easier for you to study English?

Check all that apply.

- Not really, I still rely mostly on books, a folder, a binder, a notebook...
- Yes, to some extent. I use a few sites and apps for support, for example.
- Yes, it is easier to study now. I use apps, sites, CD-ROMs, the cloud (e.g. Google Drive), translators...
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What do you do outside of class to complement your English lessons?

(all activities in English)

Check all that apply.

- I enter [www.alumni.org.br](http://www.alumni.org.br) to do the Consolidation activities in the Online Component
- I watch movies with/without subtitles
- I do the homework assigned by my teacher at Alumni (workbook, business add-on, etc...)
- I study song lyrics (and sing!)
- I watch series with/without subtitles
- I read novels (pocket books?)
- I take part in video conferences
- I use an English language practice app
- Other: .....

5. What do you rely on for support when doing the activities in the Online Component?

Check all that apply.

- Google Search
- Google Translator
- Wikipedia
- English-Portuguese online dictionaries
- English-English online dictionaries
- Coursebook, Workbook, Business Add-on
- Other: .....

6. Please comment on the similarities and differences between what you do in class and the work you do at home with the Online Component:

the similarities is the same subjects:  
GRAMMAR, VOCABULARY

ONLINE COMPONENT IS COMPLEMENT AND WE CAN  
TEXT WHAT WE LERNED IN CLASS.

7. How clear is the link between what is done in class and the content of the Online Component?

THE LINK IS CLEAR

.....

.....

.....

8. Do you use the Online Component to revise the content of your lessons along the course, or do you usually revise a few days or a week before the tests/quizzes?

Check all that apply.

- I use the Online Component to revisit lessons given (every other lesson?)
- I sometimes revise (every other week?)
- I almost never revise (once a month?)
- I revise only a week or so before the tests
- Other: .....

9. What parts of the Online Component do you use?

Check all that apply.

- Missed class? (content of each lesson)
- Homework
- Consolidation
- Answer keys (workbook)
- Other: .....

10. Which activities do you like the most?

HOMEWORK AND CONSOLIDATION

11. Did you use the voice recording tool in the Online Component? If so, how would you evaluate this tool?

SERIA BOM TER LISTENING  
E DEPOIS PERGUNTAS  
DEVERIA TER ALGUNS QUIZ  
SIMULADOS, PQ EU ACHO QUE O QUIZ AJUDA MUITO

12. What skills (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing) were emphasized overall?

LISTENING, READING AND WRITING.

13. In your experience, what could be added to or changed in the Online Component?

WOULD BE MORE QUIZ  
AND LISTENING COMPREHENSION.

14. Is the level of challenge adequate? Are some tasks more difficult than others? Which one(s)? Why?

I THINK IS ADEQUATE.

15. Was there enough instruction given in class for the Online Component tasks?

yes.

16. What impact do you feel the Online Component has had on your overall results?

I THINK IS VERY IMPORTANT.

17. "The Online Quiz is not just a test. It is an opportunity to practice and learn more." Please comment:

EU REALMENTE CONCORDO.  
DEVERIA TER MAIS.

18. The online component is not a compulsory part of the course. Should it be made compulsory?

YES I THINK SO.

19. From the beginning of the course till now, have you changed the way you use the Online Component? Do you use it more/less frequently now? Why?

I THINK THIS YEAR I HAVE STARTED USE MORE.

20. Please state your name (optional):

[Redacted name]

Powered by  
Google Forms

Questionnaire online: <https://goo.gl/forms/irOYrGsCWL8xsSmP2>

## Appendix 2

The screenshot shows a Moodle course page for 'LEADER 1'. The page is divided into two main sections: 'Missed class?' and 'Homework'. The 'Missed class?' section contains three numbered items, each with instructions and references to audio files. The 'Homework' section contains four numbered items, each with specific tasks. At the bottom of the page, there is a navigation bar with icons for home, mail, answer key, and day 1, along with copyright information for Associação Alumni 2016. The browser's address bar shows the Moodle URL, and the Windows taskbar is visible at the bottom of the screen.

**alumni** LEADER 1

**Missed class?**

1. **Student Book, p. 2: Vocabulary Link:** do exs. A, B and C.
2. **Student Book, p. 3: Listening:** do ex. A. Then, use **Audio 1.1** to do ex. B and **Audio 1.2** to do ex. C. Finally, do ex. D.
3. **Student Book, p. 3: Pronunciation:** read the two conversations in ex. A. Then, use **Audio 1.3** to do exs. B and C.

**Homework**

1. **Workbook, page 7**
2. **Business Add-on:** read the *course introduction* (pp. 1-2) and *Useful Classroom Language* (p. 3).
3. **Consolidation Activity:**
  - a. **Review of Present Tenses 1**
  - b. **Review of Present Tenses 2**
4. **Fluency Activity:**
  - a. **Talking about people's activities**

© Associação Alumni 2016  
All rights reserved

Day 1

Answer Key

23:32  
13/08/2016

## Appendix 3

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Moodle Alumni Online interface. The browser's address bar shows the URL: `moodle.alumni.org.br/blocks/quickreport/simplereport.php?id=1009&user=16088`. The page header includes the Moodle logo and the text "Alumni Online best in class" next to a globe icon. Below the header, the navigation path is "Alumni Online > Leader 1 > Students Reports". There are two tabs: "Simple Tracking" (selected) and "Full Tracking".

The main content area displays the following information:

- Course: Leader 1
- Class: 1Sem2016

Five student records are listed, each with a name, email address, status, and total time:

Student Name	Email	Status	Total Time
[Redacted]	[Redacted]	42 %	1:51:19
[Redacted]	[Redacted]	26 %	2:31:54
[Redacted]	[Redacted]	81 %	8:45:19
[Redacted]	[Redacted]	87 %	2:25:57
[Redacted]	[Redacted]	100 %	1:18:46

The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the system tray with the time 18:15 and date 14/08/2016.