



Motivational Factors in a Blended Learning Course When Teaching Students from Confucian-Heritage Culture

Peter Tze-Ming Chou^{1*}

¹*Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, Kaohsiung City, Taiwan.*

Author's contribution

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the attitudes of students with Confucian values toward blended learning classroom. In the Confucian learning culture, students are viewed as passive learners, reliant on rote memorization, assessment-driven, obedient to authority, and fearful of showing different opinions to the instructor. This style of learning is different than online learning, which encourages independence and require students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. This study comprised of 94 students who took a blended listening course in English from a medium-sized university in Southern Taiwan. A questionnaire was administered at the end of the course and it was found that the participants in this study demonstrated certain characteristics associated with the Confucian-heritage learning culture. Two important factors in helping students with Confucian values succeed in a blended classroom include classroom management and a user-friendly platform which reduces anxiety associated technology. The use of blended learning would be a good choice for such students because it offers a combination of the traditional classroom that students are used to for parts of the semester with the convenience of online learning for the other parts of the semester.

Keywords: Confucian-heritage learning; blended learning; online learning.

*Corresponding author: Email: drpeterchou@yahoo.com;

1. INTRODUCTION

The availability and use of online learning courses in the curriculum are a trend in many Western countries, but many academic institutions in Taiwan only offers a small number of online courses. Although Taiwan has always been among the forerunners of technology, one factor that prevents the widespread use of online courses is the traditional teaching and learning culture of Taiwan, which is based on Confucian values. Chuang [1] identified four main principles of Confucian philosophy: (1) forming a hierarchical society for stability and order, (2) focusing on self-cultivation, (3) creating and maintaining a harmonious environment and relationship with others and (4) living a moral life and performing virtuous behavior. Therefore, in the Confucian learning culture, students are viewed as passive learners, reliant on rote memorization, assessment-driven, obedient to authority, and fearful of showing different opinions to the instructor [2,3,4,5,6,7]. This type of learning culture is very different from that required for online learning.

Students mainly learn independently in an online learning environment; however, that does not mean that no interactions exist between the learner and the teacher or between the learners themselves. Hamdan identified that one of the core elements in the culture of online learning is the shift from unilateral communication from the professor to the students to a multilateral approach in which students interact not only with the professor but also with other classmates in the setting [8]. Online courses often include the use of synchronous and asynchronous activities in which learners can hold discussions and share their ideas. Compared with the Confucian-heritage learning culture, online learning culture also requires one to be more motivated and active in one's learning to be successful [9]. Therefore, how well learners from a Confucian learning culture can adapt to a different learning environment and the factors for successful online language learning should be explored.

2. STUDY PURPOSE

The goal of this study was to identify students' attitudes and perceptions toward blended learning. This study had two objectives. The first objective was to determine whether the participants in this study fit the description of the model Asian student discussed in the literature. Do the students hold Confucian values by which

they view learning as something that occurs in the confines of a classroom in front of a teacher giving lectures? This defines the cultural characteristics of the participants' preferred learning method. The second objective was to identify learners' attitudes toward blended learning. This identifies what factors motivate students with Confucian values. The overarching research questions are outlined as follows:

1. What are the attitudes of students with Confucian values toward online learning?
2. What are the factors of a blended learning course?

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Although studies have been conducted on how Chinese learners perform in online courses in Western settings, research on how Chinese learners perform in blended learning courses, especially in Eastern cultural settings, is lacking. A distinction should be made between the two situations because the educational culture in the West, even for face-to-face settings, requires more active learning and participation than that in Eastern culture. In previous studies, students attending online courses may have already been exposed to the active learning style in other face-to-face classes. Therefore, they may have been familiar with what was to be expected from their professors before they took the online courses in the West. The current study is different because it focused on students taking online learning courses who may only have had exposure to the Confucian learning culture. This study contributes to the literature review of how well Taiwanese learners can adapt to different learning environments such as a blended learning course. The results of the study can be useful in helping professors to design and manage blended or online courses to suit the abilities and expectations of students.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Influence of Confucian-Heritage Learning Culture

Confucian heritage and philosophy are the main influence for students from East and Southeast Asian countries. In these classrooms, academic success is often equated with effort and repeated practice with the main aim of achieving high marks, gaining university entrance, and then gaining entry to a well-paying position following

graduation [10,11]. This examination-oriented style of education system has continued up to the present day and has dominated schools and universities in highly competitive societies such as Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Singapore [12]. The classroom environment in the Confucian-heritage culture can be described as teacher-centered, competitive, and encouraging of rote-learning, which is a common theme in the literature on Confucian-heritage education [13,14]. Teachers are expected to know everything in their field of expertise and provide guidance for knowledge acquisition. The cultural expectation is also not that the student will ask for help but that the teacher will know when the student has problems [15].

In general, the Confucian philosophy emphasizes hierarchical and societal harmony. One key feature is the concept of filial piety, which requires people to have respect for age and rank, such as parents, teachers, and seniors [16]. Learners are “instructed to be obedient to their elders, irrespective of whether the demands or requests at times seem unreasonable” [17]. This explains why students are seen as passive participants in the classroom and tend not to question the knowledge of their teachers. Students respect the authority of their teachers just as they do that of their parents [18]. Another factor in the Confucian-heritage culture that affects students’ learning is the concept of “having face,” which refers to the status that one has in front of others [16]. Therefore, as expected, Confucian-heritage learners are hesitant to question or criticize their teachers and peers for the fear of “losing face” or causing others to lose face [16].

The influence of Confucian heritage and philosophy has resulted in a learning culture characterized by a passive, nonparticipatory and superficial approach to learning. Students often sit quietly, pay attention to the teacher, and copy the notes from the blackboard. Classroom interaction is often limited to students answering questions in their textbooks. Because of this learning culture in the classroom, learners from the Confucian-heritage culture are stereotyped by many Western researchers as passive learners, reliant on rote memorization with little interest in critical thinking, assessment-driven, obedient, and fearful of showing different opinions from the instructor [2,6,7]. This is a clear contrast to the learning culture of Western classrooms. Western education focuses more on fostering critical thinking, and teachers guide

students to form their own opinions instead of learning by rote. However, the difference between Eastern and Western classroom practices does not necessarily put learners from Confucian-heritage culture at a disadvantage regarding learning.

4.2 Online Learning Environment

The mainstreaming of online courses into university programs has created a type of learning culture different from face-to-face courses. Online learning encourages students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Learners study at their own pace and must rely more on reading to achieve better results [8]. Ohara identified many characteristics for successful online learning, such as level of engagement, the ability to deal with uncertainty, the willingness to try new things, and, most notably, the display of internal locus of control [19]. Communication in the classroom has also changed from a unilateral approach between the professor and students to a multilateral approach in which the students also receive opportunities to interact with each other in a classroom setting [8].

An online learning environment has several advantages. Kim, Lei, and Bonk [20] argued that asynchronous conferencing can foster more interactions and in-depth thinking, because it provides participants with a greater amount of time to process other participants’ statements and to formulate their responses. Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz [21] suggested that online interaction helps improve students’ communication skills in that they can provide more detailed answers. An online environment provides more privacy and extra time to respond than does face-to-face class discussion [22]. Online forums can also serve as a platform for promoting a greater understanding of the diversity of cultures and opinions. For example, the participants in Hamdan’s study not only learned more about their own values, beliefs, and attitudes, but also appreciated the diversity of students in the discussion forum [8]. Online discussions can be a safe place for students from different cultures and backgrounds to share their opinions, which in turn fosters greater appreciation for how cultural differences have an impact on learning.

4.3 Blended Learning Environment

A third type of learning environment combines the features of both traditional face-to-face

instruction with online learning techniques [23, 24, 25]. This is referred to as “blended” or “hybrid courses.” Hybrid courses are “classes in which instruction occurs in a traditional classroom setting augmented by computer-based or online activities which can replace classroom seat time” [26]. Studies have identified several advantages of hybrid courses. For example, hybrid courses have environmental and temporal flexibility; students interact both in class and in the online environments [27]. This is more convenient for students with more responsibilities because they do not need to commute to the campus every week; they can simply log on to a computer from any convenient location to complete their coursework [28]. Because of their flexibility, hybrid classes have also been reported to have higher student success rates in learning outcomes and higher retention rates than fully online courses [29,30]. To achieve more favorable learning outcomes, research suggested that scheduling face-to-face sessions in the beginning of a hybrid class might give hybrid classes an advantage over online courses in terms of student commitment to the course and understanding of the course structure and process [24].

Blended learning environments were found to positively affect the development of students’ motivation in classes and their active participation [31]. In a study on a web-based blended learning environment for programming languages, the students mostly agreed that the learning environment facilitated learning in terms of applications and activities, provided interaction opportunities, encouraged research, and was student-centered [27]. However, not all studies on blended learning have reported a positive outcome. Colucci and Koppel [24] found a negative outcome from the treatment group in which students were given more interaction time with instructors and peers. Students in the treatment group had missed more assignments and completed fewer tutorials. The reasons cited for the negative outcome included perceptions of lower quality course resources and the disappointment of being asked to come to class frequently, while many students felt that doing work in class was more of a burden than an opportunity.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Participants

The participants in the study comprised 94 students from the day and night division of the

English department of a medium-sized university in Southern Taiwan. Both male and female students were included in the study. The participants were all enrolled in a required third-year listening course that was offered as a blended class. There were three different classes (two in the night division and one in the day division) and the course content was the same among the three classes. All three classes also had a different instructor who assisted with the data collection in the study.

5.2 Structure of Blended Learning Course

The participants enrolled in a third-year listening course called “Professional English Listening Practice,” which is a required course for students in the English department. The course consists of 18 weeks of study, of which 9 weeks are online, and the other 9 weeks are face-to-face. The first week of the semester is designed for student orientation, with the students meeting face-to-face to reviewing the course policy and requirements. In the weeks that follow, the students undergo four learning cycles of 2 weeks of online learning, followed by 2 weeks of face-to-face instruction.

During the 2 weeks of online learning, the participants in this study worked on the listening assignments, which included answering the questions in their workbooks, participating in classroom discussions, and uploading their homework assignments. The main listening component for each week’s lectures from TOEFL was approximately 6 to 8 min in length. The workbook involved three different activities to complement the listening. The first section of the workbook for each lecture focused on learning key vocabulary from the lecture. Depending on the level of the participants, the second section of the workbook involved the student either listening for main ideas and completing an outline of the lecture or answering open-ended questions about the lecture. The final section consisted of multiple-choice comprehension questions about the lecture. There were between five and seven multiple-choice questions for each lecture. For the activities in the workbook, the participants worked through the materials themselves and were required to upload their answers to the e-Learning platform before the face-to-face session to ensure that the participants had done the assignments.

In addition to working individually on the workbook assignments, the participants had opportunities to interact with other participants

through asynchronous online discussions. For each lecture, there was a topic discussion in which the participants were required to post their thoughts and ideas on the discussion board. The participants were then required to respond to at least one of their classmates' responses. Furthermore, there was a class social network, which the participants could use to ask each other questions (and the instructor) about the assignments, technical difficulties, and reminders about due dates.

The face-to-face instructions occurred in the third and fourth weeks of the learning cycle. In the third week, the participants met face-to-face in the classroom where their instructor reviewed the workbook assignments and discussed the content of the listening materials for comprehension. The class met for two hours. Typically, in the learning procedure, the instructor would start with participants sharing their ideas from the online discussions. Then, the instructor would review the answer for the workbook, starting from the vocabulary, to the main listening activities, and, finally, the multiple-choice listening comprehension questions. Finally, in the fourth week of the learning cycle, the participants were tested on the listening assignments.

5.3 Data Collection Tool

The present study explored factors for successful learning in a blended learning environment. Information about factors for successful online learning was obtained through a questionnaire that was administered at the end of the academic school year. The questionnaire comprised twenty questions on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 6, with 1 being the lowest (*strongly disagree*) to 6 being the highest (*strongly agree*). The decision to use a 6 point Likert scale was to ensure that the participants will choose either a positive or negative attitude in the response rather than neutral. From the questionnaire, the respondents' attitudes were divided into five variables: Course Design (Variable 1; Questions 2, 8, 12 and 13), Knowledge of Technology (Variable 2; Questions 9, 10, 11 and 16), Classroom Management (Variable 3; Questions 3, 4, 5 and 7), Learner Motivation (Variable 4; Questions 14, 15, 17 and 20) and Learning Preference (Variable 5; Questions 1, 6, 18 and 19). The reliability (α) coefficients for the five variables were as follows: Variable 1, 0.63; Variable 2, 0.77; Variable 3, 0.80; Variable 4, 0.80; and Variable 5, 0.69. The overall reliability (α) coefficient was 0.92, suggesting that these scales had satisfactory

reliability in assessing students' attitudes toward successful learning in a blended learning environment.

The questionnaire was administered along with the final exam in the second semester of the course. The participants were informed that the survey was for research on online learning, and the information provided was anonymous and would not affect their course grades. The participants first completed their final exam for the listening course; after they had finished writing the final exam, they took the rest of the class time to complete the survey if they agreed to take part in the study. The participants were allowed to leave the classroom after submitting both the final exam sheets and the questionnaire. The questionnaires were then collected by the researcher for analysis.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 1 presents a summary of the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviations) for each of the questions in the questionnaire. To capture the participants' perceptions about the blended course, this study included 20 statements about various aspects of the blended class that the participants took. These statements were measured using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Question 13 ("There are too many assignments in this course") was written with a negative connotation; therefore, during the statistical input of the database, a reverse ordering was performed.

To calculate Pearson correlation coefficients, an ordinal score for each respondent was obtained by calculating the sum of responses in each of the variables. The mean score and standard deviation for each of the variables in the study is summarized in Table 2.

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed among the five variables. The calculated Pearson correlation coefficients are presented in Table 3. The results of the analyses showed that all 10 correlations were statistically significant.

A multiple regression analysis was performed using the learners' motivation as the dependent variable. From the model summary, a significance of $F(4,89) = 26.280, p = .001$ was found. The coefficient table reveals the existence of statistical significance between Variable 4 and

Variable 2 as well as between Variable 4 and Variable 3 (Table 4). The implications are discussed in the next section.

7. DISCUSSION

This study explored whether the students demonstrate characteristics of the Confucian-heritage learning culture and determined the

factors affecting course design in a blended learning course. In this study, two research questions were explored: whether the study participants possess characteristics of the Confucian-heritage learning culture and what the factors of a successful blended course are. The results of the study can help teachers understand the attitudes of students and improve their teaching in the classroom.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for questionnaire arranged by variable

Question	N	Mean	SD
Variable 1: Course design			
2. The amount of time it took to complete this course was appropriate for this content	94	4.97	1.062
8. The course content arranged in a clear and logical way.	94	5.39	0.918
12. The assignments and activities in this course help me learn about the content.	94	5.22	0.952
13. There is too many assignments in this course	94	3.46	1.365
Variable 2: Knowledge in Technology			
9. The e-Learning platform is easy to use/navigate.	94	5.24	0.991
10. The quality of multimedia (audio, video, and animation) used in the course is of good quality.	94	5.36	0.902
11. The design of the course content and materials are very appealing.	94	5.09	0.958
16. I am fairly good at using the computer.	94	4.80	1.266
Variable 3: Classroom Management			
3. When I have questions, the instructor is available via email or online discussion (such as Line).	94	5.39	0.883
4. There are many opportunities to interact with other virtual students in class discussion.	94	4.81	1.080
5. I understood the course expectations and assignments.	94	5.44	0.811
7. When I have questions or problems in this course, I was able to get help or response from the instructor in a timely manner.	94	5.13	1.050
Variable 4: Learner Motivation			
14. I like online classes because I can do the assignments whenever I have time.	94	5.30	1.096
15. This course has increased my interest in learning English	94	5.06	0.959
17. I am good at setting goals and deadlines for myself.	94	4.89	0.898
20. I plan my work in advance and turn in my assignments on time.	94	4.98	0.927
Variable 5: Learning Preference			
1. I would prefer to take this course in the traditional classroom format.	94	3.31	1.826
6. It is important to me for the teacher to be physically present when I learn.	94	4.24	1.543
18. I like to learn from listening to lectures.	94	5.20	0.934
19. I like to learn with friends.	94	4.98	0.994

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for variables

Variables	N	Mean	SD
1. Course design	94	19.1277	2.85956
2. Knowledge in Technology	94	20.4894	3.11343
3. Classroom Management	94	20.7660	3.15692
4. Learner Motivation	94	20.2340	3.06358
5. Learning Preference	94	17.7340	3.88317

Table 3. Summary of Pearson correlation coefficients

		Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4
Variable 2	Pearson Correlation	0.720*			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001			
Variable 3	Pearson Correlation	0.732*	0.622*		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.001		
Variable 4	Pearson Correlation	0.634*	0.651*	0.643*	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.001	0.001	
Variable 5	Pearson Correlation	0.387*	0.397*	0.414*	0.444*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).*

Table 4. Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	Constant	3.228	1.676		1.926	.057
	Course Design	.157	.130	.147	1.207	.231
	Technology	.308	.105	.313	2.927	.004
	Class Management	.272	.106	.280	2.561	.012
	Learning Preference	.116	.063	.147	1.826	.071

Questions relating to Variable 5 were used in this study when analyzing whether the study participants possess characteristics of the Confucian-heritage learning culture. Of the four questions, the responses for Question 1 received the lowest rating, with a mean of 3.31, implying that the participants only somewhat disagreed with the statement “I would prefer to take this course in the traditional classroom format.” This number was not as high as expected; this is possibly because the questionnaire was administered at the end of the academic year, a point at which the participants had studied and understood some of the advantages of a blended learning class such as not having to come to school every week. However, the result for Question 18 showed that the participants had the traditional way of thinking as in the Confucian-heritage learning culture; they believed learning by listening to a teacher lecture in front of a class to be important. Question 18 scored a mean of 5.20, indicating that the participants agreed with the statement “I like to learn from listening to lectures.”

For the second research question, Variable 4 was used as the dependent variable in the multiple regression analysis using SPSS. This study applied Variable 4 with the objective of

determining the factors that affect learners’ motivation to study in the different learning environment of a blended learning class. The results showed that learners’ technological knowledge as well as good classroom management were important factors in motivating students to learn. One possible explanation is that when learners are confident and comfortable with using technology in their daily lives, they are more willing to apply this knowledge in their classroom learning; consequently, they are less likely to resist learning in an environment that differs from the traditional classroom. The items that received positive feedback included “the e-Learning platform is easy to use/navigate” and “the quality of multimedia (audio, video, and animation) used in the course is of good quality.” This shows that in the current world of technology, the functionality and the quality of the computer programs that students engage in affect their perception of the quality of learning. This is similar to the reasons why some software and app developers succeed, while others fail, on the basis of how much they appeal to the mass market.

Variable 3 was also statistically significant when compared with Variable 4. The two items that

received the highest scores from the respondents were “I understood the course expectations and assignments” and “when I have questions, the instructor is available via email or online discussion (such as Line).” This reveals that when it comes to teaching either a blended learning class or an online class, ensuring that the students are very clear about the course expectations and assignments is important because it gives the students a sense of security. Because they know what is expected of them in class, students can plan ahead and manage their time to complete the assignments. For blended learning classes or online classes, students with a strong sense of responsibility may even finish their assignments ahead of the due dates, allowing them to have more free time during other parts of the course. The other important aspect of classroom management in a blended course is the availability of the instructor to answer any of the students’ questions. In a traditional face-to-face class, many students often ask their teacher questions during the break or after class. They feel a sense of security knowing where and when they can find the teacher for help; the results of the questionnaire in the current study also show that the respondents viewed the availability of the instructor to answer questions about the course via email or online as important. Numerous tools are currently available for instructors to use to communicate with their students away from the classroom; the popular tools include Facebook and Line. These tools allow for easier and quicker responses from teachers because they can easily see the notifications on their smartphones whenever a student posts a question or comment. The teachers can also easily respond from their smartphones.

8. IMPLICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Learner motivation is important in learning because it keeps students wanting to do something for an extended period. When designing or teaching a blended course, teachers should consider the two variables that were found to be significant predictors of learner motivation, namely Variables 2 and 3. First, for Variable 3, it is important to clearly explain the classroom expectations and assignments to the students at the beginning of the semester. Thus, students will clearly know what is required of them during the weeks online in which they do not need to come to class. When the students

can successfully complete the assignments and tasks online, they feel confident and happy about their learning. Frustration and a negative attitude toward online learning will occur when students cannot successfully complete the assignments and tasks online; this is why it is important for the teacher to be available to answer any of the students’ questions. The results of the questionnaire also show that it is important for the instructor to be available through various means of communication such as email, Facebook, or Line, and that it is important for the instructor to answer or address the students’ questions in a timely manner. This study recommends that teachers should fail to answer emails or messages on social media for more than 1 week. Failure to provide timely answers may cause students to have negative perceptions toward online courses, because they know their questions would be answered immediately if the course was in a traditional face-to-face format.

Next, when designing an online or blended course, teachers should ensure that the online platform has a clear layout in which all the information is easy to find and the functions are user-friendly. The two highest-rated questions in Variable 2 were whether the e-Learning platform is easy to use and whether the quality of multimedia (audio, video, and animation) used in the course is good. Teachers should ensure that the video or audio uploaded onto the online platform contains a loud and clear voice. Each video does not have to be as long as a lecture; what is important is that it is well-organized and easy to follow. This study recommends that all students should be shown how to access the information for the course as well as how to perform different tasks such as uploading homework assignments and class discussions. Giving students this demonstration in the first few weeks of class is important because not all students in the classroom are keen to know how to use computers, particularly for mature students. In addition, knowledge in technology may influence how well instructors are able to manage the classroom. Currently, the use of social media platforms such as Facebook or Line is very common. To fully utilize social media apps in the classroom, this study recommends that instructors create a group page for their classroom in order for students to have easy access to their instructors when they have problems or questions about the course.

9. CONCLUSION

Blended learning combines the use of traditional face-to-face instruction with online teaching. This combination is an effective means of transitioning students from the traditional Confucian-heritage learning culture to pure online classes. Although students in this study demonstrated certain characteristics associated with the Confucian-heritage learning culture, their needs could be addressed through classroom management and reducing the anxiety associated with computer and technology use. The use of blended learning would be a good choice for such students because it offers a combination of the traditional classroom that students are used to for parts of the semester with the convenience of online learning for the other parts of the semester.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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