

The Learning Experience of Iraq Middle-Aged Adult Learner in Online Undergraduate Degree

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Abstract

This paper has based an interview with an Iraq Middle-aged adult female to gain her experience at how she completed an online course in Iraq. The paper presents findings from a case study which explored insights of her experience in online English programme in Iraq. The research questions focused on why Middle-aged adult learners could carry on and complete the programme, what factors supported her completion of the programme, and which conditions seemed to slow down the process. Findings from the interviews suggest that interaction in the learning, accessibility of the programme and encouragement from others were some of the factors that facilitated the completion of the programme. However, multiple roles for female students, technology related problems and disappointment were some of the major challenges for completion of the programme.

Keywords: online course; Middle-aged; adult learning; interviews.

1- Introduction

Generally, Iraq was considered the best performing Previous to the period of 1991 in the Arab world and beyond before 1991. UNESCO confirmed that its educational programmes in Iraq had been founded on the country's impressive human capital (UNESCO, 2005). Zangana (2008) argued that Iraqi women's training was the main concern for both the various Iraqi governments and society at large. Thus, it was considered an essential part of the national development programme. To date, this might be one of the reasons why Iraqi women are motivated to take distant education or online programmes.

Researchers have shown that necessity of harmonising between works, family responsibility and educational responsibility could be among the main challenges (Kalliath, Hughes and Newcombe, 2012; McNulty, 1992). These studies suggest that most of these females face some challenges when they decide to undertake their graduate programmes. However, the number of adult female tends to be more numerous than men in distance learning (Kramarae, 2003); they struggle to be successful in the online programme. Thus, in Iraq Middle-aged adult females is one of the categories of this group who choose for online learning and succeed because of the flexibility in scheduling their activities. However, in Iraq the Middle-aged adult working female study graduate programmes for many reasons the most common are the progression in their career, seeking for promotions, more wages and particular implementation.

2- Literature Review

Most of the studies have shown that adult learners can study and complete online programme (Bocchi, Eastman & Swift, 2004; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner & Ison, 2003). Although some writers in adult learners have focused on learners in the programme on variables average performance in marks and total of distance or online courses formerly registered (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005), other authors have focused on factors that have influenced the adult learners interaction and support (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001) to complete the programme. On the other hand, Simpson (2003) issues that could make learners remain in the programme to the

end. All the same, there is a paucity of evidence on the how Middle-aged adult females succeeded with multiple roles and responsibilities (Kramarae, 2001). Therefore, there is a need to understand the insights of the adult learning experience on how they manage to complete the online programme.

3- The Purpose and Context

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the learning experience of Middle-aged adult learners. The study focused to gain an in-depth understanding of insights that influenced female adult learner to pursue the online graduate programme. One Middle-aged Iraq woman who did her undergraduate English course in Iraq was interviewed in Kajang where she is living with family. The interviews ended in 15-20 minutes. The respondent replied to open-ended questions about her experiences as an online learner in the context of her working lives and family duties.

4- Design of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain the insights of experience of an Iraqi middle-aged female in online English programme in Iraq. The female was purposefully selected. The purposive sample is appropriate when the researchers want to find specific information respondents. Being part of fulfilling the requirement of the course assessment, purposive sample was appropriate to fulfil the requirement of the research. Thus, it was necessary to use purposive sampling to classify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation (Neumann, 2003). Purposive sampling does not give population validity (Stake, 1995), however, the reason and influence of purposive selection are based in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Studying information-rich cases such as adult female adult learners yielded insights and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon rather than empirical generalisations (Patton, 2002). In this research, interviews were guided by the following questions:

- i. What is learning the experience of middle-aged female adult learners in an online programme?
- ii. Why do middle female adult learners enrol for an online programme?
- iii. How do middle female adult learners persist and finish the online programme?
- iv. Where does middle female adult enrol to learn online undergraduate programme?
- v. When does middle female adult enrol to learn online undergraduate programme?

5- Data Analysis

Interview with participant was transcribed verbatim. Thereafter, the transcriptions were open coded the process which enabled to recognise key words and phrases that frequently appeared (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Then, these codes were prearranged into related categories. The code were manually created codes were further refined. The creation of code families facilitated analysis of data and identification of themes. Because participant was the primary source of information, it was crucial that the data reflected her responses as dependable as conceivable. In this regards, member checking (Stake, 1995), the participant received a summary of the findings and the request to confirm the accuracy of what she described in the interview. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is an important aspect that determines the credibility establishing of researchers and their findings.

6- Findings

From the analysis of transcriptions, themes emerged that revealed complexity of issues which influence adult learners. These influences are categorised into two category; the first categories comprise issues that which can be termed as enabling conditions that made the learner able to finish her programme and second the conditions which seemed to have hampered adult learning of the programme.

6.1. Enabling conditions

Being able to interact with others accessibility of the programme options and a variety of encouraging influences were key themes that support sustaining and completion of the programme in this category.

6.2. Interaction in learning

The participant associated her success with the interaction she had with fellow online learners, online tutors and nature of the subject matter. She was more interested when the subject matter was appropriate. In this regards, the participant described:

I really enjoy my programme when I interact with learners of similar courses, ask the about the learning materials. We share the experience of how each one of us understood the content, about how we could submit an assignment and communicate with the ones who were conducting the programme.

These findings are similar to (Hayes & Flannery, 2002; Rovai & Baker, 2005) who found that female learners learner better when they are connected to other learners. It means that female prefer to learn in the environment where they are associated with others. It is also significant to note that female learners tend to have a sense of

contentment when they interact with other learners and get support from course providers (Herbert, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003). The participant maintained, “it was enjoyable to connect in a group mail and enjoy the discussion”.

6.3. *Accessibility of Programme*

This finding is similar to (Sullivan, 2002) who found that most female learners prefer distance learning for convenience with their roles. In the interviewing, the respondent explained the convenience of the online programme led her arranging a schedule to meet other life roles. The respondent explained her flexibility and appropriateness as follows:

I do appreciate the flexibility and relevance of the programme. I did my family routine, went to work and also continued with my programme at the same time. Yet, in some cases, it was so intense to complete module. But felt ok when one module is done. This programme meant a lot to me.

Similarly, the above explanation is consistent to (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005) who explicitly maintain that adult can learners are ready and interested in learning when they find the value of their programme. In explaining the response as to why she went through the online programme, the interviewer replied, “I wanted to get promotion and salary increment”.

6.4. *Encouragement from others*

Support from peer learners and online instructors offer substantial support for online learners (Kemp, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai & Baker, 2005). For the interviewee, the connection she made with other learners was significant for her online programme. The respondent mentioned that when she started the programme, she connected with online friends with similar and supported each other in terms of materials and moral support. “I really felt good to communicate with another student, reminding ourselves of doing assignments and helped each other”. Similarly, describe how she benefited from the support given by instructors like the rest of learners. She explained:

Our online conversations with instructors by emails, online chats and appropriateness of their responses, they were supportive and equally important in finishing my programme. They reminded us of the deadlines for submitting assignments, our progress and most importantly, they provided us with encouragements which were significantly important for our success and excelled in the programme.

The participant explanations suggest both support from other learners and staff contribute significantly for her completion of the programme. It was not only about connecting to each other but a way to let the learners get through their programme.

7- **Hampering Conditions**

The participant expressed her experience in an online programme in relation to conditions that could potentially impede her progress with the programme. In this category, multiple roles, technological problems and frustrations were the main themes that emerged transcription.

8- **Multiple Roles**

Participant talked about her effort to manage different role as a mother, wife and public servant. She was of the view that these roles could sometimes interfere with her online programme. This particular finding is similar to Kramare (2003) who found that most female learners are hampered by many responsibilities such as taking care of family members (father, kids and others) while at the same time they do proceed with studies. In this regards, she revealed:

Learning at this my age is very challenging... you meet a lot of difficulties to accomplish the programme. It's about who you are... have to take care of kids and their father at the same time, you find overcome by burdens of many issues to attend at.

Even with multiple responsibilities, the female managed to complete her online programme. However, her explanation suggests that she could have been easier has there any other person who could take this responsibility. Findings from previous research suggest that females with families have experienced similar problems when they embark on distance learning, yet they struggle to ensure they accomplish their study (von Prümmer, 2000).

9- **Technological Problems**

One of the barriers in online learning for adult learners is related to infrastructure and technological problem which include among others “hardware issues, course production and internet problems” (Galusha, 1998, p.14). It was significant to learn that this study maintains and support previous studies. The participant explained the use of computer and internet connectivity to be a most important challenge. She was in some cases unable to

communicate because the internet was not reliable. She lamented: “many times I could not access the internet because there was no signal, so I suspended my activities or even shut the computer down and do other activities”. From the transcriptions, it was also revealed that some technical issues were hindered smooth progression of the programme. The participant recalled: “I can remember at times my computer jammed (*sic!*). I really did know what went wrong ... I in fact stranded wherever it happened”.

The participant concurrently enlightened her lack of computer skills at the beginning of the programme. The participant explicated: “I was in fact not familiar with many applications at the start, so I had to take effort learning both using a computer and accomplishing assignments”. According to Galusha (1998), most of adult learners are not well knowledgeable in using computer technology which also can obviously eliminate learners with the lack of computer.

10- Frustrations

Respondent was troubled, concerned and hectic about the issue of being able to accomplish the burdens of assignments. Sometimes she felt overwhelmed a number of assignments and time limit to submit those assignments and other family responsibilities. For that reason of the incompatible of burdens of responsibilities, the Iraq female was sometimes unable to accomplish assignments timely as a result of complexities of problems making her infuriated. “It really frustrating thinking about household tasks, assignments and other things as well, It was sort of confusion at first... It was actually hectic to deal”. For this learner, the feeling of frustrations was intensified by the difficulties and complications of multiple responsibilities she held as a woman.

11- Conclusion

This study has revealed that online female adult learners are influenced by the positive and negative condition in accomplishing their coursework and life accomplishment. Generally, the online learning for women is not new, is has not received much attention. This female encountered both positive and negative challenges to make sure they accomplish the online programme. The participant has portrayed her enthusiasm to accomplish the online programme regardless of multiple as an adult learner which substantiates motivation for an adult to change. However, still much need to be done to explore the insights of adult learners and the way they change and adjust their time and viewpoint.

12- Limitations

This study was limited to only one respondent from Iraq who did her online course to accomplish specific interest in her career. To use the only respondent as a case study could also be regarded as a limitation, although in qualitative research the idea of N=1 is also recognised and the case was exclusively important to reveal insights of the individual.

13-Implications

Available evidence suggests that adult learners have a habit of to seeing themselves as independent learners and believe that their need can meet appropriate and in a friendly manner (Hadfield, 2003). In this regards, instructors and providers of online education for adult learners should ensure that they make all the necessary efforts to these learners accomplish the programme. Finds from this study have revealed that adult learners effort insights of the experience in the processes of learning so that the information available must efficiently be utilised to enhance distance or online adult learning.

14- Recommendations

Findings from this case study and the literature that have been reviewed confirm that there is the need for further research to investigate to the extent to which other conditions might influence or impede Middle-aged adult Iraq females may benefit from distance learning with multiple responsibilities. Similarly, future research might focus to exploring other variables that might significantly influence distance or online academic accomplishment while attending other roles as well. Further research could examine how differences in professional and economic status in Iraq influence women’s capability to follow online programmes.

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