

Conference Paper

Using LMS and Blended Learning in Designing a Course to Facilitate Foreign Language Learning

Nihal Gökgöz Gördeslioğlu and Tüzün Ergün Yüzer

Koc University, English Language Center

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find out if the design of a course planned using language management systems, i. e. BlackBoard Learn, can improve the learning process and the effectiveness of a listening and speaking course investigating the perceptions of the learners. The study was conducted in the Listening and Speaking Course II during the second semester of the academic year 2019 at Koc University, Istanbul with 88 participants who started the academic year as false beginners. Despite their low proficiency level, the general expectation of the instructors and administration for learners is to pass the institutional proficiency exam within an academic year. Due to time constraints and pressure to help learners attain a higher proficiency level in a short time, the researchers decided to blend BlackBoardLearn into their course design to achieve “the optimal learning environment” as Marsh (2012) discussed. Based upon the research findings by Zhao (2003) that the use of technology alone may not produce the desired results, and the way it is used is more important, the researchers tried to design the course bearing in mind that factors such as “the delivery mode, task designs and materials, learners’ expectations and preferences”, (Alpala&Florez, 2011) may make a difference in the success of blending technology into language learning. Through the integration of online listening practice tasks and online speaking task submissions, the researchers tried to address the abovementioned issues in the course. In this way, they tried to create maximum exposure to the target language and promote self-paced learning, which also enhances student motivation and autonomy. In order to analyze this, the learners were given a questionnaire to find out about their perceptions regarding improvement in their listening and speaking skills. The findings were generally positive for both listening assignments and speaking tasks, yielding to important implications associated with online task designs.

Keywords: Blended Learning (BL), learning management systems, Blackboard Learn, listening and speaking skills, learner perceptions, course design

1. Introduction

Use of technology has obviously permeated every part of our lives. It has changed how we live, work and most importantly how we learn. Used to support both teaching and learning, it has created major structural changes in educational programs with the integration of digital learning tools into schools, distant education or online learning,

Corresponding Author:

Nihal Gökgöz Gördeslioğlu
ngokgoz@ku.edu.tr

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open educational resources and Blended Learning through the use of learning management systems (LMS). Broadly defined, Blended Learning is “thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). With an emphasis on unleashing full potential of learners, Singh and Reed (2001) defined Blended Learning as “a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome” (p. 1). As these definitions suggest, what it means to teach a course entwined with technology requires careful planning to achieve success in reaching learning objectives. It would, therefore, not be wrong to say that it is the teachers’ responsibility to carve out an enriching and empowering learning environment. Kern (2006) states that “These days, given the common presence of computers in many institutions of learning, we may be past the point of deciding whether or not to use computers in language teaching. But we still need to know how to make the best uses of them to accomplish specific goals.” (p.189). It seems that we are left with no choice but to use technology to complement face-to-face classes. It is not a matter of whether or not, but rather we need to answer the question how best to integrate technology into our teaching. In addressing this question, previous studies can shed light on the impact of different models of BL implemented in various contexts.

2. Literature Review

Over the last decade, blending foreign language programs with technology, in particular with LMS has been investigated from different angles by researchers due to its potential to transform learning environments (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). It is important to note that there is a substantial body of research yielding positive results (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Kırkgöz, 2011). Al Zumor et al. (2013) studied Blended Learning using Blackboard Learn and concluded that it has resulted in increased vocabulary knowledge and reading opportunities as well as creating a platform for successful adoption of language learning strategies. Bataineh & Mayyas (2017) used Moodle as the learning management system and suggested that use of Moodle had a positive effect on learners’ reading comprehension and grammar. Kırkgöz (2011), in her study, revealed that integration of technology, in particular video cameras in the class, helped improve learners’ speaking proficiency, and learners approached blending the course positively. Asoodaret. al. (2014), in

comparing virtual and blended classes in terms of group work experiences, reported “pleasure in learning, anticipation in problems, and development of communication plans” in virtual learning (p. 533). Dennis (2012) investigated learners’ perceptions about integrating the e-Learning application into traditional EFL classroom. The e-Learning application featured various learning and teaching resources including an e-book, audio files with scripts and a user manual. The results also demonstrated that the e-learning platform promoted an autonomous learning environment, motivating learners to study more. Aslani and Tabrizi’s (2015) study revealed positive effects of Blended Learning on grammar teaching using multimedia software. In another study, Mohammed Ali (2017) probed into the impact of using learning management systems, in particular, Blackboard Learn, on learner motivation, suggesting that Blackboard Learn increases student motivation compared to traditional learning methods. Most research focuses on the effectiveness of BL by studying learner perception. However, with a change in the research angle, Alsaied (2016) tried to discover language teachers’ perceptions about the use of Blackboard Learn. It was revealed in the study that teachers believed that the use of Blackboard Learn created “a structured e-learning platform that facilitates the development of a healthy-learner centered arena” (p. 43), which indicates a positive perception of teachers toward the use of Blackboard Learn. Fageeh (2013) and Kassem (2018) also showed positive results regarding the writing skill. As for the listening and speaking skills, Kashgari and Asseel (2014) demonstrated that while the results were positive for the listening skill, the learners in the study were not sure if their listening skills improved or not. Similarly, Hussain (2016), who also studied listening and speaking skill, reported that the learners in the study had positive attitudes toward using Blackboard Learn as a learning management system.

While the prevailing attitude towards Blended Learning is positive, there is research over the past decade which has pointed to the opposite conclusion (Dogoriti, Pange & Anderson, 2014; Srichanyachon, 2014; Tosun, 2015). Dogoritiet. al. (2014) investigated the usefulness of Moodle and Facebook and found out that the learners did not favor Moodle alone. When Facebook, however, was added to the online learning platform, the results indicated an enhanced learning process. Similarly, Srichanyachon’s study (2014) showed that despite the fact that learners accepted the convenience of the Internet and the usefulness of LMS, they did not really agree with the idea that learning through LMS is better than face-to-face learning. Tosun (2015), in her experimental study, did not find any significant effects of using digital tools in vocabulary instruction. This brief review of the literature shows that blended learning is achieved in many different forms such

as through the use of social media, learning management systems, technological tools and the internet. This diversity complicates the process of assessing the effectiveness of technology (Zhao, 2003). In this respect, Kern (2006), like Zhao, rightly concluded that interpreting even the positive findings can be problematic, which all comes down to the idea that “it is not the technology per se that is effective or ineffective but the particular ways in which the technology is used” (Kern, 2006, pp. 188, 189).

This study, therefore, aims to investigate if the design of a course planned using language management systems, i. e. BlackBoard Learn, can improve the learning process and the effectiveness of a listening and speaking course investigating the learners’ perspectives by providing detailed descriptions to the questions that Garrett (2009) thinks a particular piece of research needs to answer: “What kind of software, integrated how into what kind of syllabus, at what level of language learning, for what kind of language learners, is likely to be effective for what specific learning purpose?” (p. 698). Therefore, within the scope of the present study, the following research questions are investigated:

1. What are learners’ perceptions regarding the advantages and limitations of online speaking task submissions?
2. What are learners’ perceptions regarding the advantages and limitations of online listening assignments?

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to examine the learners’ perceptions on the design of a course with the integration of online tasks using language management systems, i. e. BlackBoard Learn. The study was conducted on the 5th week of the second semester of 2018-2019 academic year.

3.1. Participants

The subjects were Foundation level learners who started the Koc University preparatory program in the 2018-2019 academic year. These learners are placed at this level based on their scores in Michigan Placement Test, which is a multiple choice test assessing various language areas such as listening, reading, and grammar. Learners who scored between 0-24 were placed in the Foundation group which is the lowest level in the program.

3.2. Course design

The Listening and Speaking course is a course taught as L&S I in the first semester and L&S II in the second semester of the academic year. The course is designed to improve learners' listening and speaking proficiency by integrating listening and speaking in a synergistic manner. The mandated course book and the activities designed for this course revolve around a theme (e. g. history, culture, jobs etc.) The themes, tasks and the design of the course, by reinforcing and interacting with each other, allow ample opportunity and input for listening and speaking tasks to be processed and studied. In the semester the study was conducted, there were 11 graded Speaking Tasks in total, 7 of which were online submissions and the rest were in class debates, role-plays or presentations. The online submissions were audio/video recordings of 2-3-minute-talks on the given topic. Additionally, there were 5 graded Weekend Listening Assignments. All graded speaking tasks are given to the learners at the end of each unit, after covering topic/theme-related vocabulary, topic-related grammar and structure necessary to perform the tasks. Similarly, in each unit - along with discussion activities - there are also while listening and note-taking activities, which are done in class with the teacher. However, note-taking has been a challenging skill for foreign language learners, and it is undoubtedly the most necessary skill in their academic lives. Bearing this fact in mind, class hours are not enough for both the teachers and the learners to do sufficient practice to attain the desired proficiency level. Therefore, we designed some outside graded listening assignments to give learners the opportunity to complete more practice during the semester. The materials used in these online listening assignments had the same structure as the materials covered in class. Therefore, the learners were familiar with the nature of the practice materials and knew how to work with them before taking the test.

3.3. Instruments

A five-point Likert scale type of questionnaire (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) was used in order to elicit learners' perceptions of their improvement in their listening and speaking skills through online tasks and activities. The questionnaire had three sections (see appendix). The first section collected data regarding the learners' use of technology type, time they spend for online tasks and assignments, their listening and speaking grades in the first semester and their overall GPAs (Grade Point Average). The

second section collected data about online speaking task submissions. This section consisted of 16 items and an open-ended section asking about the advantages and disadvantages of these tasks. Similarly, the last section collected data about online listening assignments, using the same number of questions followed by open-ended advantage and disadvantage questions.

4. Results

The questionnaire was sent to 135 learners. Out of 135, 101 responded to the survey, 13 of whom responded partially, resulting in 88 fully answered responses.

4.1. Results of online speaking tasks

The main scope of this part of the questionnaire was to assess the opinions of the learners on the effectiveness of the online speaking task submissions and whether they improved their speaking proficiency. Table 1 shows the percentages that represent each item.

Table 1 shows that most learners liked the freedom to do the speaking tasks anytime and anywhere they wanted with the percentages being 71% and 69% respectively. Similarly, 55% of learners thought working at their own pace was an advantage of doing speaking tasks online. Regarding the improvement in their speaking skills, almost 60% of learners suggested that having the chance to record the tasks many times before submission helped improve their speaking skills. Almost 68% of learners thought it was easy to upload tasks online, and 59% mentioned they didn't have any technological problems during submission. The fact that online speaking tasks are graded was a source of motivation for 63% of learners.

Table 2 shows the emerging themes from the open-ended section of the questionnaire. Out of 76 learners, 27 learners said that doing speaking tasks online gave them a chance to practice and improve their vocabulary, which also indirectly helped them improve their speaking skills. Twenty-one learners think that doing online speaking tasks is less stressful and more comfortable. Thirteen out of 76 said they liked the freedom to do the tasks anytime and anywhere they wanted.

Table 3 shows the emerging themes related to the disadvantages of online speaking task submissions. Seventeen out of 74 learners mentioned that recording tasks many

TABLE 1: Learners' perceptions on doing speaking tasks online.

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Weighted Average (%)
I liked the freedom to do the speaking tasks anytime I wanted.	3.45	5.75	19.54	40.23	31.03	3.9
Having the chance to record the tasks many times before submission helped me improve my speaking skills.	2.30	8.05	29.89	37.93	21.84	3.69
I find it easy to upload online speaking tasks on BlackBoard Learn.	9.20	4.60	18.39	44.83	22.99	3.68
Being graded online is better than being graded in class.	5.75	17.24	31.03	29.89	16.09	3.33
While doing online speaking tasks, I often had technological problems.	14.77	44.32	26.14	10.23	4.55	2.45
I did not think I made any progress by doing online speaking tasks.	11.36	39.77	32.95	12.50	3.41	2.57
I find online speaking task submission interesting.	2.27	21.59	42.05	27.27	6.82	3.15
Online speaking task submissions are more convenient for me than face-to-face task performances.	11.36	21.59	19.32	28.41	19.32	3.23
I made a lot of progress by doing online speaking tasks.	2.27	21.59	34.09	35.23	6.82	3.23
I like online speaking task submission because I can work on my own pace.	1.14	6.82	36.36	36.36	19.32	3.66
I feel more confident while doing speaking tasks online than performing it in class.	1.14	13.64	26.14	44.32	14.77	3.58
I liked the freedom to do the speaking tasks anywhere I wanted.	1.14	10.23	19.32	43.18	26.14	3.83
Online speaking task submissions are time-consuming.	6.82	39.77	31.82	17.05	4.55	2.73
I find online speaking task submission useful.	2.27	7.95	32.95	45.45	11.36	3.56
I prefer to perform my speaking task to my teacher instead of using a technological device.	3.41	17.05	22.73	39.77	17.05	3.5
I did online speaking tasks because they were graded.	0.00	11.36	25.00	38.64	25.00	3.77

times is time consuming for them. Sixteen out of 74 said they had technological problems. Twelve out of 74 said there weren't any disadvantages.

TABLE 2: Learners’ open-ended answers regarding advantages of online speaking tasks. *

ANSWERS	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
It helped me practice and improve my speaking skills	27
It is less stressful and more comfortable to do the tasks online	21
I liked the freedom to do the tasks anytime/anywhere I wanted	13
I liked the opportunity to listen to myself speaking many times and realize my mistakes	7
It helped me improve my pronunciation	4
It is useful and practical	3
We don’t waste our class time doing these tasks in class	2
It is good to know that they are graded, so we feel a must to do the tasks	2

*Out of 88, 76 learners answered this open-ended section. Some learners wrote more than one answer.

TABLE 3: Learners’ open-ended answers regarding disadvantages of online speaking tasks. **

ANSWERS	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
Recording many times takes much time	17
Sometimes I have technical problems	16
Not speaking face to face is not natural	8
It is not helpful to my learning/it is not useful	6
I memorized, so I think it didn’t help my improvement	5
Not getting detailed feedback is a problem	4
We read from paper	3
Some learners cheated	2
Repeating many times is boring after some time	1
It is difficult	1
One week is not enough to do the task	1
I think grading online speaking tasks are not necessary	1
There aren’t any disadvantages	12

**Out of 88, 74 learners answered this open-ended section. Some learners wrote more than one answer.

4.2. Results of online listening assignments

This part of the questionnaire aimed to assess the opinions of the learners on the effectiveness of the online listening assignments and whether it improved their listening and note-taking skills. Table 4 shows the percentages that represent each item.

Table 4 shows that most learners liked the freedom to do the listening assignments anytime and anywhere they wanted, with the percentages being 77% and 75% respectively. Similarly, 77% of learners thought working at their own pace was an advantage of doing online listening assignments.

TABLE 4: Learners’ perceptions on doing listening assignments online.

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Weighted Average (%)
Online listening assignments helped me improve my listening skills.	2.27	4.55	13.64	46.59	32.95	4.03
I find online listening assignments useful.	0.00	2.27	17.05	50.00	30.68	4.09
I feel more confident while doing note-taking exercises online than doing such exercises in class.	2.27	13.64	14.77	42.05	27.27	3.78
I like online listening assignments because I can work on my own pace.	0.00	3.41	19.32	56.82	20.45	3.94
I made a lot of progress by doing online listening assignments.	1.14	10.23	35.23	42.05	11.36	3.52
I did not think I made any progress by doing online listening assignments.	14.77	50.00	21.59	9.09	4.55	2.39
I always did the practice material before I did the test.	5.68	25.00	21.59	34.09	13.64	3.25
Having the chance to listen to the lectures many times before taking the test helped me improve my listening skills.	0.00	5.68	27.27	47.73	19.32	3.81
I did online listening assignments because they were graded.	4.55	11.36	25.00	40.91	18.18	3.57
I liked the freedom to do the online listening assignments anytime I wanted.	0.00	6.82	15.91	43.19	34.09	4.05
Online listening assignments are not necessary.	28.41	40.91	26.14	2.27	2.27	2.09
While doing online listening assignments, I often had technological problems.	19.32	45.45	25.00	9.09	1.14	2.27
I liked the freedom to do the online listening assignments anywhere I wanted.	1.14	6.82	17.05	48.86	26.14	3.92
I find it easy to do online listening assignments on BlackBoard Learn.	3.41	4.55	14.77	60.23	17.05	3.83
Being graded online is better than being graded in class.	2.27	10.23	27.27	38.64	21.59	3.67
Doing the practice material before taking the test is unnecessary.	13.64	42.05	31.82	12.50	0.00	2.43

Regarding the improvement in their listening and note-taking skills, almost 80% of learners mentioned that online listening assignments had a positive effect on listening skills. Almost 80% of learners thought it was a useful activity to improve their listening skills. Sixty-five percent mentioned they didn’t have any technological problems during submission.

TABLE 5: Learners’ open-ended answers regarding advantages of online listening assignments. ***

ANSWERS	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
It improved my listening and note-taking skills	42
It gives me to do extra practice outside class	11
I liked the opportunity to listen as many times as I want	9
I liked the opportunity to listen/do the tasks anytime/anywhere I want	9
Listening outside class is easy, useful and comfortable	7
It is less stressful to listen outside class	3
I am more successful when I do the listening tasks outside class	2
I liked working at my own pace	1
***Out of 88, 77 learners answered this open-ended section. Some learners wrote more than one answer.	

Table 5 shows the emerging themes from the open ended section of the questionnaire. The number of learners who believed online listening assignments improved their listening and note-taking skills has the highest frequency, being 42 out of 77. The other positive outcome about online listening tasks is the fact that it gave learners the opportunity to practice outside class. Eleven out of 77 learners thought like that.

TABLE 6: Learners’ open-ended answers regarding disadvantages of online listening assignments. ****

ANSWERS	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
Sometimes there are technical problems	12
Listening tasks being graded causes stress because there is only one chance	5
It is time-consuming	5
Some learners share answers/they cheat/ injustice	3
We can’t ask questions to the teacher/ there is no interaction with the teacher	3
It is difficult	3
The environment is not parallel to the exam situation. It doesn’t prepare us to the exam	2
One week is not enough to complete the task	2
It is difficult to concentrate outside class	1
There aren’t any disadvantages	33
****Out of 88, 66 learners answered this open-ended section. Some learners wrote more than one answer.	

As Table 6 indicates only 12 out of 66 learners had problems while doing the listening assignments. Half of the learners, 33 out of 66, thought there were no disadvantages with online listening assignments.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the research have demonstrated the learners' perspective regarding the usefulness of online listening and speaking task submissions. This study provides course designers and teachers with useful information when developing tasks and designing courses. The results can be categorized into 3 main sub-topics.

According to Tables 1, 2 and 3, the most important aspect of online speaking tasks is the opportunity to do these tasks anytime and anywhere learners like. As Marsh discusses (2012), blending classes with online components enables learners to get rid of "constraints of fixed 'classroom' hours" (p.12). Having the opportunity to get the control of their own learning empowers learners in terms of the development of their autonomous learning. In addition, most of the learners liked working at their own pace. Learners have different learning styles and paces. These online materials help them "review and consolidate in their own time and at their own pace" (Marsh, 2012, p. 18). It is a well-known fact that in a language classroom, there will always be learners who feel too shy to speak and cannot fully utilize the speaking activities. These online activities are also useful specifically for this group. More than 50% of the learners reported feeling more confident during online speaking tasks. This may be attributed to the fact that online speaking activities may create a safer environment for such learners.

The questionnaire compared online speaking tasks to in-class tasks from 3 different angles: online grading, convenience and face-to-face performance. When analyzed, learners have no negative attitude towards being graded online. Similarly, they also think online task submissions are more convenient than performing them face-to-face in class. However, when they were asked to choose between online or in class tasks, most of them preferred to perform in class tasks with their teacher. This result can be explained by consulting the learners' responses in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. They thought that speaking to a technological device was not natural, and they could not get detailed feedback. Parallel to the findings of the present study, Srichanyachon (2014) reported that although learners agreed with the usefulness of LMS, they still preferred face-to-face instruction. It can be concluded that despite the indisputable usefulness of LMS, they should not replace or even dominate traditional face-to-face instruction.

As for the learners' perceptions regarding the progress they made, majority of learners agreed that they could improve their English by recording themselves many times.

However, interestingly, in the open-ended section of the questionnaire, the most frequently mentioned disadvantage is the fact that recording many times was time consuming. Similarly, most of them thought they made progress in their speaking skill. However, more than 30% of the learners were not sure if they made any progress. It is important not to underestimate this number. The abovementioned reasons may also account for this uncertainty. Because there is no face-to-face instruction and detailed feedback, learners may not realize their own progress clearly. The result of this finding from the stand point of speaking course design could be the conversion of individual speaking task submission into pair or group task submissions. This way, it may be possible to address the issue of the tasks' not being natural, and the interaction going on during this process may possibly lead to an increased perception of improvement in their speaking skills.

Tables 4, 5 and 6 indicate that most of the learners thought online listening tasks are useful and helped them improve their listening and note-taking skills. This outcome can be explained by the fact that the design of the listening assignments and materials were guided and parallel to the classroom instruction.

It should also be noted that moving listening and speaking tasks- whether they are interactive or not- beyond the classroom as an extension of face-to-face instruction makes room for more in class practices by decreasing time allotted for assessment.

Overall results of this study indicate that blending courses benefits both teachers and learners by creating more classroom instruction hours and encouraging learners to improve their learning. However, as Alpala and Flórez(2011) discussed, it is important that the design and amount of online materials “must be the teacher’s focus because, occasionally, technology is just seen as something useful for drilling or to have fun with, but without pedagogical and learning purpose” (p.166). In essence, we assert that pedagogical materials to be used in blended learning should be designed for specific classroom purposes and learning outcomes in order for them to be effective.

Appendix: Foundation Level- Listening & Speaking Course - Student Questionnaire

General Information

1. Which device do you prefer to use to do your listening and speaking tasks on BlackBoard Learn?

Personal Laptop/ipad - Laptops/PC at university - Mobile phone

2. What was your GPA in the Fall Semester?
3. What was your score in the listening final exam in the Fall Semester?
4. What was your score in the speaking final exam in the Fall Semester?
5. How many hours do you spend for listening and speaking tasks/activities on BlackBoard Learn weekly?

Less than 1 hour 1-2 hours 2-3 hours More than 3 hours

5.1. Online Speaking Tasks

1. I liked the freedom to do the speaking tasks anytime I wanted.
2. Having the chance to record the tasks many times before submission helped me improve my speaking skills.
3. I find it easy to upload online speaking tasks on BlackBoard Learn.
4. Being graded online is better than being graded in class.
5. While doing online speaking tasks, I often had technological problems.
6. I did not think I made any progress by doing online speaking tasks.
7. I find online speaking task submission interesting.
8. Online speaking task submissions are more convenient for me than face-to-face task performances.
9. I made a lot of progress by doing online speaking tasks.
10. I like online speaking task submission because I can work on my own pace.
11. I feel more confident while doing speaking tasks online than performing it in class.
12. I liked the freedom to do the speaking tasks anywhere I wanted.
13. Online speaking task submissions are time-consuming.
14. I find online speaking task submission useful.
15. I prefer to perform my speaking task to my teacher instead of using a technological device.
16. I did online speaking tasks because they were graded.

5.2. Online Listening Assignments

1. Online listening assignments helped me improve my listening skills.
2. I find online listening assignments useful.
3. I feel more confident while doing note-taking exercises online than doing such exercises in class.
4. I like online listening assignments because I can work on my own pace.
5. I made a lot of progress by doing online listening assignments.
6. I did not think I made any progress by doing online listening assignments.
7. I always did the practice material before I did the test.
8. Having the chance to listen to the lectures many times before taking the test helped me improve my listening skills.
9. I did online listening assignments because they were graded.
10. I liked the freedom to do the online listening assignments anytime I wanted.
11. Online listening assignments are not necessary.
12. While doing online listening assignments, I often had technological problems.
13. I liked the freedom to do the online listening assignments anywhere I wanted.
14. I find it easy to do online listening assignments on BlackBoard Learn.
15. Being graded online is better than being graded in class.
16. Doing the practice material before taking the test is unnecessary.

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