USING ICT IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The application of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in English learning and teaching has become very popular. Using the Internet to learn a language can compensate for the lack of communication with the native speakers face to face and can create wide opportunities to enhance learning. While ICT has had a major influence on the teaching and learning of languages, there are some controversies between theory and practice, especially using it for different areas of language study (Barret and Sharma, 2007). Some disagreements cover areas such as the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, language skills and testing. However, advantages of English learning on the Internet surpasses its disadvantages. The Internet activities promote learner self-monitoring ability, strengthen and develop students' cooperation, encourage the use of multimedia and network technology, allow to employ weblogs and wikis for online publishing, foster participation in different thematic discussion groups and chat rooms and communication with foreign pen-pals via e-mail as well as employ other interactive atasks such as podcasting (Zhong, 2008).

The use of weblogs has become preferable to the use of common paper portfolios due to the ease of their application. There is no need for accumulating files of written work, which solves the problem of storing space and, to some extent, helps reduce students' and teachers' workload.

The **goal** of this research have been to investigate learners' attitudes to the application of e-portfolios in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and to analyze learners' reflections on e-learning in view of fostering sustainable lifelong learning. The **method** of investigation is a specially designed questionnaire to study learners' attitudes to e-learning and statistical treatment of the data by means of SPSS software. The **participants** of research are the students who learn English for Specific Purposes at tertiary level.

The study investigated learners' perceptions of employing electronic language portfolios for conducting various assignments in English for Specific Purposes classes. The research involved

university students of different specializations. Learners' experience of applying weblogs and reflections on their benefits for improving language skills have been analyzed and statistically treated using the SPSS software.

The results have shown that students are positive about application of ICT in ESP classes. Writing e-entries encourages students' critical thinking, develops their creativity, motivates learners to use digital technology and encourages collaboration of learners.

Key words: English for Specific Purposes, Information Communication Technology (ICT), weblogs, lifelong learning.

Introduction

The language portfolio has become an important part of language instruction due to its multiple opportunities such as authentic assessment of learners' knowledge and skills, their active participation in the evaluation process, and development of skills of critical thinking. The European Language Portfolio for Higher Education conforms to the common Principles and Guidelines of the Council of Europe (Vosicki, 2003). It contains information on specific descriptors for the linguistic skills required to study in the higher education. The most important feature of portfolios is the support of reflective learning, which means that learner self-assessment plays a central role. The reasons for engaging learners in self-assessment are: first, it is a learner-centered learning; second, self-assessment is an integral part of evaluation processes which aim at encouraging learners to take responsibility for their learning; third, it is a tool for lifelong language learning (Little, 2005). Portfolios usually include a wide variety of materials: students' written work such as essays, summaries, presentations, and reflections on their progress, teacher-completed checklists, and recordings of student talks. Portfolios provide teachers with information which helps to make decisions and to evaluate students' progress. Traditional paper portfolios contain files or binders holding papers, pictures and drawings that take up a lot of space. In an electronic portfolio, information can be easily stored in a computer hard drive, flash, DVD or on the world wide websites. Electronic portfolios take up little space and hold a great deal of information which can be easily retrieved and used for collaborative student work. Recent innovations of using ICT include weblogs, or so called individual websites that can be used by learners for writing various contributions. The advantages of weblogging in

language classes comprise instant publishing online, awareness of having a readership, and creating an online portfolio of student written work (Kavaliauskienė et.al., 2006). The portfolio can serve as part of an assessment program, which either includes a record of students' achievements or simply documents their best work and can be used as a means of promoting learner reflection. The most common areas of students' reflections presented by Nunes (2004) are: syllabus (7%), instruction (36%), learning (43%), and assessment (14%). The majority of researchers agree that the main benefit of portfolios is promotion of reflective practice, because without reflections the portfolio remains a folder of the accumulated papers (Coombe & Barlow, 2004).

The learners' experiences using the portfolio framework were investigated by examining their written reflections (Beckett & Slater, 2005), and various items such as learners' weekly entries on their research projects, end-of-term reflections, and interviews, were analyzed. It was found that only one fifth of the 73 participants enjoyed project work; one quarter had mixed feelings, and 57% perceived it negatively. Moreover, the high drop-out rate from the course existed because some students found the course too difficult or believed English classes should be limited to the study of language and resented being asked to accomplish non-linguistic tasks because they did not see the value in such assignments.

The key drawback of portfolios is the additional demand on teachers and students. Teachers need extra time for planning, developing strategies and materials, meeting with individual students and small groups, and reviewing and commenting on student work. Portfolios have been characterized by some teachers as a worthwhile burden with tangible results in instruction and student motivation.

Learning a language is a lifelong activity, therefore learners need to be equipped with strategies and techniques to continue learning throughout the life. The e-learning initiative is part of the European Community's overall e-Europe strategy, which has been supported since 2000 when it was designed by the Lisbon European Council. E-learning is expected to make a significant contribution to lifelong learning.

Goals of the research

The goals of this research are, firstly, to investigate learners' attitudes to the application of e-portfolios at university level, and secondly, to analyze the learners' reflections on e-learning in view of fostering sustainable lifelong learning.

Participants and methods

The respondents in this research are full-time university students who study ESP for either social work, law or psychology at the Department of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University. In this project, there are 75 participants, predominantly females at the intermediate level of English proficiency. The research methods include a survey which is designed to study students' attitudes to weblogs and reflections on e-learning experiences.

Results

The frequencies of the learners' responses to the survey on application of ICT to learning English for Specific Purposes have been researched using the five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), not sure (3), agree (4) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire statements are reproduced in each Table to make the reading easier. Internal consistency reliability is met by satisfying two conditions: multi-item scales are used, and items are measured in the same target area (Dornyei, 2003). The frequencies of students' responses are shown in Table 1. The responses have been processed statistically using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The two-tailed levels of significance have been computed. Statistical approach determines if the findings are significant and valid beyond the limited sample of 75 respondents in this study.

Table 1. The total frequency of learners' responses (in %) to the statements on each item of Likert scale. There were 3 groups of respondents who study either psychology (24 students), or social work (26 students), or law and penitentiary activities (25 students). Points of Likert scale are: **1** - strongly disagree, **2 -** disagree, **3** - not sure, **4 -** agree, **5 -** strongly agree.

	Frequency of responses, %														
Specialization	Psychology					Law					Social Work				
Points of Likert scale	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

1. Writing entries to weblogs fosters active and creative learning.	0	6	6	75	13	0	0	17	58	25	0	0	25	65	10
2. Reading peers' contributions to weblogs helps to develop critical skills.	0	0	6	81	13	0	0	17	58	25	0	0	15	55	30
3. Writing creative essays is useful for autonomous learning.	6	0	6	69	19	0	0	17	25	58	5	0	15	60	20
4. Personalizing my own weblog encourages the creative use of digital technology.	0	0	25	56	19	0	0	8	50	42	5	0	20	50	25
5. Writing comments to peers' weblogs encourages collaboration in learning.	0	19	19	56	6	0	0	25	42	33	10	20	0	65	5

The same data are represented in a different way in order to emphasize the number of positive responses. The total percentage of the responses 'agree' and 'strongly agree' for each group of respondents is shown in Table 2. It is evident that for most statements frequencies of the responses are in the range between 70% and 88% except for the last statement relevant to the collaboration among peers. This response is quite understandable: the learners are reluctant to express any critique towards the peers' entries and avoid writing defamatory remarks in order not to upset their friends.

Table 2. Frequencies of positive responses.

	Frequency of responses, %		
Specialization	Psychology	Law	Social Work
Positive Responses	≥ 4	≥ 4	≥ 4
1. Writing entries to weblogs fosters active and creative learning.	88	83	75
2. Reading peers' contributions to weblogs helps to develop critical skills.	94	83	75
3. Writing creative essays is useful for autonomous learning.	88	83	80

4. Personalizing my own weblog encourages to use digital technology creatively.	75	92	75
5. Writing comments into peers' weblogs encourages collaboration in learning.	62	75	70

Table 3. The Means and Standard Deviations for each group.

Specialization	Psychology		Law		Social Work	
Number of question	Mps	SDps	M$_l$	SD$_l$	Msw	SDsw
1. Writing entries to weblogs fosters active and creative learning.	3.94	0.66	4.08	0.64	3.85	0.57
2. Reading peers' contributions to weblogs helps to develop critical skills.	4.06	0.43	4.08	0.64	4.15	0.65
3. Writing creative essays is useful for autonomous learning.	3.94	0.90	4.42	0.76	3.90	0.89
4. Personalizing my own weblog encourages the creative use of digital technology.	3.94	0.66	4.33	0.62	3.90	0.94
5. Writing comments into peers' blogs encourages collaboration in learning.	3.50	0.87	4.08	0.76	3.35	1.15

The Mean values M with an appropriate index of specialization (Mps for psychology, Msw for social work and M$_l$ for law students) and Standard Deviations (SDps, SDsw and SD$_l$) for 3 groups of respondents have been computed. The data of statistical processing of the students' responses are presented in Table 3.

The data show that values of Means are above the average, and the scattering of Standard Deviations is rather small. These findings prove that the students in all 3 groups of various specialization have positively evaluated weblogs as a learning tool. An additional statistical analysis carried out by the means of ANOVA method has shown that in spite of the small sample of respondents the data are statistically significant, and evaluation of all questions is positive in a two-tailed statistics with significance levels p between 0.002 and 0.001. The detailed data of computation outcome of significance levels for each group are omitted for the sake of brevity.

Students' reflections on learning experiences make an important contribution to improving learning outcomes and might have a positive context in lifelong learning. The complete survey of learners' reflections was reported elsewhere (Kavaliauskienė et.al., 2007). Learners have been very positive about their experience because they are aware of the importance of self-monitoring and self-evaluation in learning as well as critical thinking about their achievements. To exemplify reflective practice, a few excerpts from the students' electronic entries are reproduced below. The language has not been corrected for the sake of authenticity, and the names of students have been withheld in order to preserve anonymity.

Student A. E-portfolio contributions helped me a lot. It is very important to collect all entries in a file and analyze my learning progress throughout the academic year. *Student B*. Making e-portfolio contributions was easy because I knew the requirements, i.e. exactly what and how I should do. I think it is useful to keep the contributions online because the portfolio content shows what I have learnt the course and how I succeeded. *Student C*. At first I found it hard to understand the benefits of e-entries, but later I realized how important to have all my written works in one place and to reflect on my achievements or failures. I am learning how to learn. *Student D*. All materials that we are writing in e-portfolio help us to observe our progress or regress. I can evaluate my work of several months and decide if I make enough efforts to improve my language skills. I am pleased with my progress – I work hard. *Student E*. E-portfolios were very useful to me. I have improved my writing & reading skills, built up vocabulary. I learned how to use different online dictionaries, monolingual and bilingual. Writing entries helped me to improve my English skills. *Student F*. Public publishing is a very good way of demonstrating language learning; being able to choose what to contribute gives me a feeling of satisfaction with my learning. Reflecting on learning helped me to understand what I learnt and what I didn't.

Conclusions

The following two conclusions can be drawn from the data of this study. Firstly, university students are positive about application of electronic portfolios for improving writing skills. Statistical processing using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software has proved that the data are significant, and in the two-tailed statistics the significance level p is

within the reasonable limits: from 0.002 to 0.001. This manifests the validity of the findings and shows that the implications may be extended beyond the studied sample which consisted of a limited number of 75 respondents. Secondly, students' reflections on the experiences of using weblogs offer insights into how to engage students in successful self-assessment which might be a beneficial tool for lifelong learning.

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