IN COLLABORATION OF TWO UNIVERSITIES: STUDENTS' SELF-ASSESSMENT AND SELF-EVALUATION OF ONLINE ACTIVITIES

Galina Kavaliauskienė
Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania
gkaval@mruni.eu
Jūratė Patackaitė
University of Applied Sciences, Vilnius, Lithuania
j.patackaite@vvf.viko.lt

Abstract: Self-assessments of students are often used in order to find out what their attitudes to learning activities are. Students from the two collaborating universities were introduced to weblogs while studying at universities and encouraged to use their weblogs for uploading written entries on professional topics. In this research, students were also asked to enter their subjective opinions on class activities in their weblogs. Some reflections from weblogs are reproduced in this article. The purpose of this study is to examine participants' attitudes to various exercises in online activities that they had to do in learning professional vocabulary and checking listening comprehension in English for Specific Purposes classes. Students' self-evaluation grades of vocabulary knowledge and listening skills are analyzed for both samples of participants. Students of two Lithuanian universities were enrolled in Bachelor's degree courses on two specializations: sociocultural education and business management. The questionnaire was used to ascertain the opinions on the online activities. The methods of the research include the administration of part of a designed questionnaire, analysis of students' responses and their statistical treatment by a means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The research supports the view that use of technology in the classroom is beneficial. In general, respondents are content with their class activities in doing online exercises and basically their attitudes depend on the types of exercises: students are positive about easy formats and negative about more difficult formats. Moreover, students believe that collaborative learning in class is beneficial for increasing communicative ability they will need in their future jobs. Computations of Spearman's correlation coefficients have shown that there are good correlations among students' responses of two universities at the significance levels either 0.05, i.e. at the probability of 95%, or 0.01, i.e. at the probability of 99%, and the values of Spearman's coefficients vary between 0.705 and 0.863. These results mean that the relationships are not likely to be due to chance and may be extended beyond the studied samples despite their smallness.

Keywords: collaboration, online learning, student self-assessment, student self-evaluation, student reflections

1. Introduction

Online learning has gained popularity due to technology progress and its flexibility. The concept of online learning comprises all forms of electronically supported learning. The term is usually used to refer to out-of-classroom and in-classroom teaching / learning experiences via technology. The concept might include either full classroom learning with online support or the classic 'blended learning', i.e. an integrated combination of traditional learning with web based online approaches.

The aim of this research is to study learners' attitudes to various exercises in online activities of ESP vocabulary learning and listening comprehension. The research was conducted in the project of collaboration between two universities.

The methods of the research include the administration of part of a designed questionnaire, analysis of students' responses and their statistical treatment by a means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The respondents were the students of two universities, who study sociocultural education at Mykolas Romeris University and Business Management at the University of Applied Sciences.

The intended outcome is implications for language teachers on the use of different exercises in teaching ESP. It is important to find out what difficulties students encounter in learning professional vocabulary and listening to authentic e-records in English. Another intended outcome is to compare achievements of students who study ESP at different universities.

2. Recent literature background

Since the beginning of the 21st century the number of publications on English language teaching and learning online has been growing fast. Because of the increased opportunities of using the Internet, all language skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening - can be practiced (Chinnery 2010). Moreover, as a number of course books are available online, it is easy to implement vocabulary practice by employing exercises of various formats and difficulty levels. A systematic search by a team of researchers of the literature since 1996 identified more than a thousand empirical studies of online learning. Analysts (Means et. al. 2009) screened these studies to find those that (a) contrasted an online to a face-to-face condition, (b) measured student learning outcomes, (c) used a rigorous research design, and (d) provided adequate information to calculate an effect size. As a result of this screening, 51 independent effects were identified that could be subjected to meta-analysis. The meta-analysis found that, on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. The factors affecting student satisfaction with online learning were studied by Drennan et. al. (2005): students are found to be satisfied with getting flexible learning material, being autonomous and using innovative learning styles. These results suggest that student satisfaction is influenced by positive perceptions toward technology and an independent learning mode.

However, some students prefer traditional face-to-face instruction. The study of the factors that often lead most learners to opt for face-to-face rather than online activities has revealed that resistance towards the online mode is mainly due to cultural and logistic factors (Manca et. al.). Reasons to choose online learning mainly lie in personal interest and motivation. Detailed description of the latest literature on e-learning in English for Specific Purposes is presented in the article by Kavaliauskienė and Valūnas (2012). The authors examined the perceptions of 164 respondents of 5 different specializations at a tertiary level. Student views on varies aspects of e-learning are either positive or negative: their opinions depend on chosen ESP specialization. However, as the blended learning is acceptable to majority of students (Kavaliauskienė 2011), it is recommended to combine traditional face-to-face instructions with online activities. Generation Y, born in the mid-1980s or later, is also known as the Internet Generation, who are well familiar with technology and prefer to communicate by e-mail or text-messaging rather than face-to-face (Reilly 2012). Our research into challenges that ESP students face at university level allowed to conclude that main sources of difficulty are ESP vocabulary and impromptu speaking (Kavaliauskienė 2012). Similar findings were reported by Evans and Morrison (2011). However, undergraduates in Canada and Hong-Kong are confident and achievement-oriented while our students need guidance and feedback and they lack confidence. Earlier we examined the application of Moodle tasks for subject revision in ESP (Kavaliauskienė 2011). The findings proved that respondents were satisfied with their activities in the Moodle area. As e-learning has become mandatory at university level, it has been highly recommended as less stressful and beneficial because students can learn at their own pace and at the convenient time. Another benefit is instant electronic evaluation which is not possible in formal testing on paper.

3. Respondents and research techniques

The participants in this research are full-time 1st year students, who studied English for Sociocultural Education (1 group, 15 students) at Mykolas Romeris University and English for Business Management (1 group, 12 students) at the University of Applied Sciences. The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course is adjusted to the requirements for a Bachelor degree. The level of proficiency was either B2 or C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The method of research includes the application of a specially designed questionnaire on students' attitudes to doing online exercises. Self-reported data are used as it is the most frequent technique of identifying students' attitudes. The questionnaire has been designed in accordance with the

common standards of surveys (Dornyei, 2003). The way of gathering data employed administration of the questionnaire to two above mentioned samples of respondents. The relevant part of the questionnaire consists of 9 statements (Appendix): 5 statements on attitudes to learning professional vocabulary, and 4 statements on checking understanding of online listening. Students responded to the statements on a 5-point Likert's scale ranging from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). Statistical processing of the findings has been conducted by a means of the Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). It included the following computations: frequencies of students' responses, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of reliability, the Means and the Standard Deviations for the responses of two samples of respondents, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test in order to check the normality of data distribution and Spearman's correlation coefficients, which allow to determine if there is a linear relationship between two samples and if the data might be extended beyond the obtained findings.

4. Results and discussion

In this study two types of online exercises have been used in teaching ESP: professional vocabulary and listening comprehension.

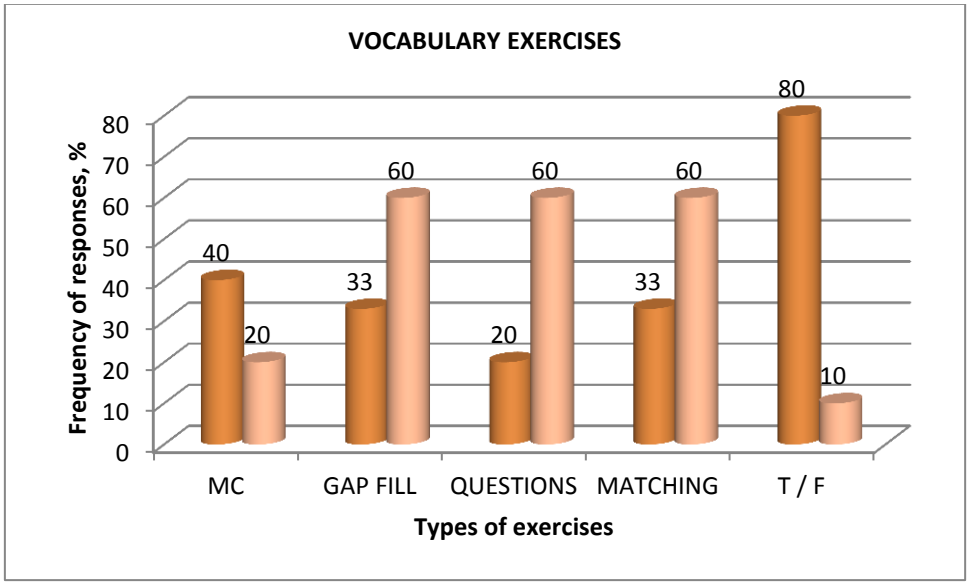

Figure 1: Frequency of responses versus types of vocabulary exercises. 1st cylinders show positive self-assessment responses, 2nd cylinders show negative self-assessment responses.

The frequencies of positive and negative responses by students who study sociocultural education (SCE) are shown in Figure 1. Five types of vocabulary exercises have been used in the ESP classes: multiple

choice statements (MC), gap filling sentences (GAP FILL) with the vocabulary bank given, open-ended questions (QUESTIONS), matching terms and their definitions (MATCHING) and True / False (T/F) questions. As it can be seen in Figure 1, the easiest are T / F exercises: 80% of students do such tasks easily. The second tasks that students assess as reasonably easy are multiple choice (MC) exercises: 40% cope with them well. Gap filling (Gap Fill) and matching terms with definitions is easy for 33% of students. The most difficult appears answering open-ended questions (QUESTIONS): only 20% of students manage to do this task well. Adding up positive and negative frequencies of responses does not bring about the total percentage equal to 100% because there have been neutral responses, i.e. some students were neither positive nor negative about difficulties of these activities. For instance, the total of positive and negative percentages for MC exercises is equal to 60%, which means that 40% of students have not been sure about this activity. The same applies to other formats of exercises.

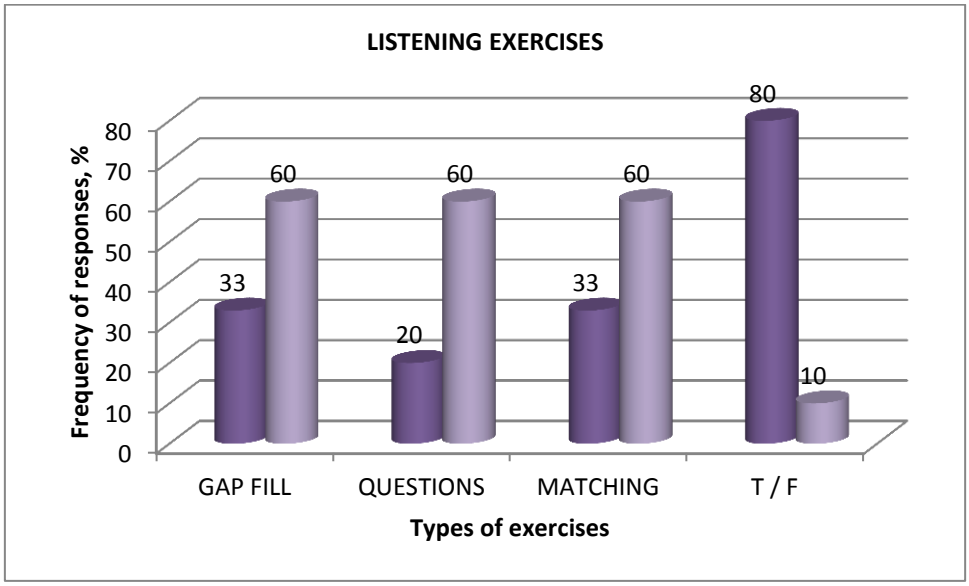

Figure 2: Frequency of self-assessment responses versus types of listening exercises. 1st cylinders show positive responses, 2nd cylinders show negative responses.

Figure 2 displays frequencies of self-assessment of online listening comprehension by the students of the same SCE specialization. Similarly as in Figure 1, the easiest are True / False exercises: 80% of students have found them easy. Other activities cause majority of students some difficulties: 33% of students cope well with exercises of gap filling and matching terms with their definitions, and 20% of students manage to answer written questions well, while other students encounter problems in understanding. It seems logical to assume that both types of activities are interrelated: poor knowledge of vocabulary causes difficulties in listening comprehension. Similarly as in the vocabulary practice, some students are not sure of encountered difficulties, which might imply that comprehension depends on a particular professional issue.

Self-assessments by students of Business Management (BM) specialization are very close – within the error limits - to the findings shown in Figures 1 and 2. Therefore, there is no point in displaying these data. The most important conclusion that may be drawn, however, is that the students encounter the same difficulties in both universities independently of their chosen specialization.

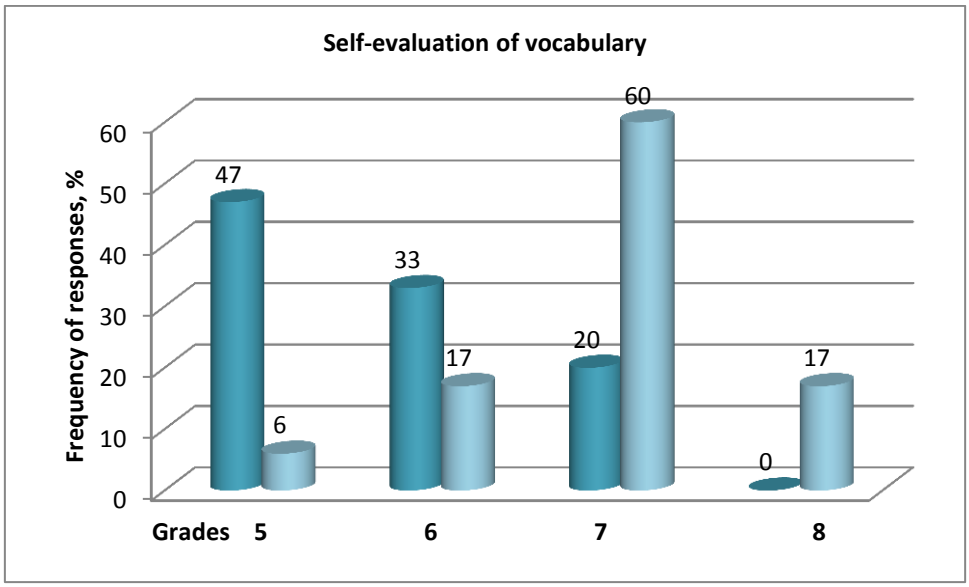

Figure 3: Self-evaluation grades of vocabulary knowledge by students of MRU (1st cylinders) and by students of UAS (2nd cylinders).

Self-evaluation grades of vocabulary knowledge are displayed in Figure 3. Students were asked to write themselves a grade on a 10-point scale. In other words, how they would evaluate their professional vocabulary if they had to write a formal test on the spot without preliminary preparation. The 1st cylinders show data by the MRU students, and the 2nd cylinders – by the UAS students. It may be seen that grades vary from 5 (weak) to 8 (good). 80% of sociocultural education students at MRU evaluate their knowledge as weak and satisfactory, and only 20% of students think their vocabulary knowledge is sufficient. However self-evaluation grades of students of business management specialization at UAS are more favorable: 60% believe their knowledge is sufficient and 17% think it is good.

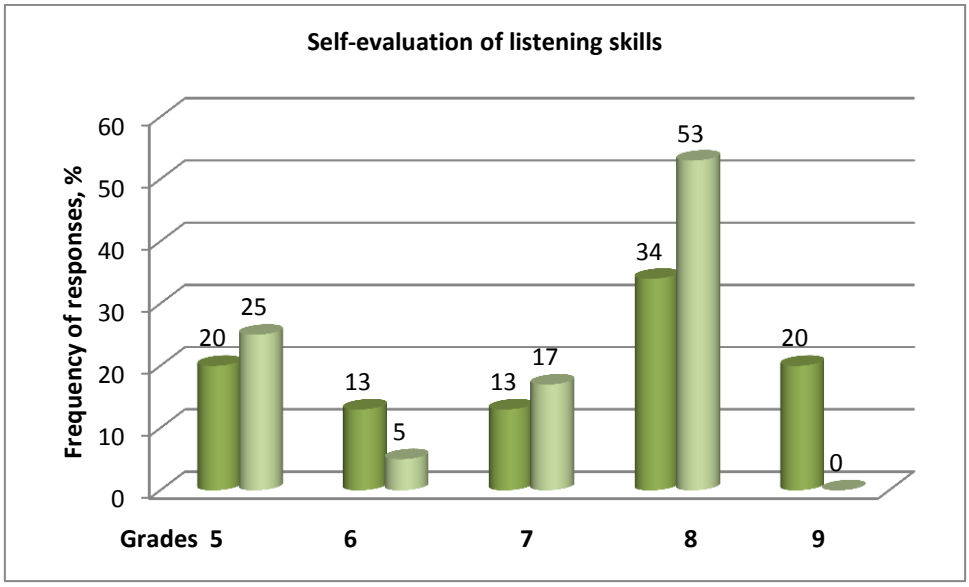

Figure 4: Self-evaluation grades of listening skills by students of MRU (1st cylinders) and of UAS (2nd cylinders).

Self-grading of listening skills by both samples is shown in Figure 4. The 1st cylinders display the responses by the MRU students, and the 2nd cylinders – by the UAS students. It may be seen that between 33% and 30% of students of both specializations believe that they possess rather poor listening comprehension skills – they give themselves either weak or satisfactory grades. However, 54% of MRU students think their skills are good (grade is 8) or very good (grade is 9), and 53% of UAS students think their skills are good (grade is 8).

5. Statistical Processing of Data

The obtained responses have been processed statistically by a means of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) in order to determine how comparable and reliable the findings are. Internal consistency reliability is usually estimated by computing Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. According to Dornyei (2003), results are reliable if the value of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is at least 0.70. As all computed values of Cronbach's Alpha coefficients exceed this value and are equal to from 0.74 to 0.87, it may be concluded that the obtained data are consistently reliable.

The Pearson's or Spearman's correlation is usually computed when two variables X and Y are related by a linear function. In the case of the Spearman's correlation it is not necessary to require the normal distribution. However, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests have been computed and in each case the distribution has been found normal. This means that either correlation coefficient may be computed. Here the computations of Spearman's correlation coefficients are presented. It is necessary to emphasize that Spearman's correlation coefficients can range between negative one (-

1.00) and positive one (+1.00): positive values indicate direct relationships, while negative coefficients indicate inverse relationships. The strength of relationship depends on its value: the larger the coefficient is, the stronger the relationship is. In statistics, the result is statistically significant if it is unlikely to occur by chance. The significance level is usually labeled as the *p*-value and is presented for a two-tailed test. The value of statistical significance of correlation coefficients is important for the interpretation of the relationship between two samples. The appropriate value, at least 0.05, means that the relationship is not likely to be due to chance. Larger than 0.05 values of the significance level mean that the probability of the significant relationship between two items is smaller than 95% and the relationship is likely to be due to chance.

The data in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate good correlations for the self-assessments at the significant levels either 0.05 (the probability is 95%) or 0.01 (the probability is 99%) with the values of Spearman's coefficients between 0.688 and 0.808 for vocabulary exercises and between 0.705 and 0.863 for listening exercises, which means that the relationships are not likely to be due to chance.

Table 1: Computed Spearman's Correlation Coefficients and Significance Levels *p* for the Responses of students of both universities on vocabulary exercises.

Survey statements for vocabulary activities	Spearman's coefficients	Significance Levels *Sig. p* (2-tailed)
Multiple choice	0.718*	0.019
Gap filling	0.718*	0.019
Open-ended questions	0.688*	0.028
Matching	0.808**	0.005
True / False	0.808**	0.005

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2: Computed Spearman's Correlation Coefficients and Significance Levels for the Responses of students of both universities on listening exercises.

Survey statements for listening correlations	Spearman's coefficients	Significance Levels *Sig. p* (2-tailed)
Gap filling	0.733*	0.016
Open-ended questions	0.751*	0.012
Matching	0.705**	0.023
True / False	0.863**	0.001

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

6. Students' reflections on e-learning

At the end of the term, students were requested to give written feedback on their online activities in the ESP classroom. Each of them has written the final self-assessment in their weblogs, which can be viewed online at the websites http://espforeducation.blogspot.com and http://espforbusinessmanagement.blogspot.com.

Some extracts from students' feedback are reproduced below. With a few exceptions, language has not been corrected for the sake of authenticity.

6.1 Excerpts from the weblogs of students who study at Mykolas Romeris University.

http://jgudzinska.blogspot.com/

The task that we always did in English classes was online listening practice. It was very helpful, especially for our exam. I was surprised because I didn't expect that it will be not that difficult to answer the questions. So my achievements were quite good. Practicing online exercises on vocabulary was very useful: it helped me to learn definitions of professional terms. Although these exercises were hard to do, class work was not boring nor tiring. We did the following exercises: true or false, filling the blanks and multiple choice quizzes.

http://skaraliunaite.blogspot.com/

Online listening practice helped me to learn more English terms, I learned to understand other speakers. It helps prepare for real life situations, where they will have to listen, respond to, and make sense of a variety of voices. Vocabulary exercises helped to learn terminology, do exercises better and make no mistakes.

http://vmozeikaite.blogspot.com/

I was always good at listening, and usually I was successful at this task. Maybe that is because I was learning in music school or my knowledge of English was good, so I am glad that usually I could concentrate and do this task well. Talking about exercises online, it was very hard for me, because the terminology was new and I needed some time to learn it. It was easier when we did exercises with topics from past seminars, because at home I tried to learn new words and definitions, but when we just analyzed new vocabulary and tried to do the exercises, it was funny, because we scored not so much, the results were really bad then. For doing online exercises I got grades 6 and 5 for active participation, but I am not glad of them at all – I could have performed much better.

http://evvasilevskyte.blogspot.com/

At the start of the course, listening online was a bit difficult, but after some practice it became easier for me to answer questions. I had difficulty with Gap Fill exercises. Knowing that all this will be in the exam, I tried to listen carefully, pay attention to recently learned words. Online vocabulary exercises were tricky,

although I often knew what those words mean, but did not know how to respond. The most difficult was when I had to write the definitions for a given word. However, all of these online exercises have been carried out working in teams, which is better than on my own. I think that class exercises helped to memorize definitions and develop listening skills.

6.2 Excerpts from the weblogs of students who study at the University of Applied Sciences.

http://aseselgis.blogspot.com

We had to do some post-listening tasks like answering open-ended questions, multiple choice, gap fills, synonyms matching, etc. These were not hard for me, I didn't face any big problems, but sometimes it was hard to hear what the speaker says.

http://ipospesinska.blogspot.com

Listening to natural British language is still quite hard, because they speak fast and it is difficult to follow the speech, note the essentials and write with no grammar mistakes at the same time. Also there are words that I do not understand. But I think it is important that I am able to catch the main ideas that help me to understand text. Synonym Matching was quite difficult, because my English vocabulary is not very good. Gap Filling exercises were mostly easy, because I was able to see all text and fill in all words right.

http://lzakarauskaite.blogspot.com

During our classes we had to do listening comprehension exercises as well. Such listening tasks involve three exercises: T/F, synonym matching and gap filling. Of all the tasks performed in our classes, listening is the most difficult for me. I often don`t hear what is being said and, as a result, when I need to choose if the answer is true or false I choose the wrong one. Also, in a gap filling exercise I have problems with new words which is often misleading when I need to choose the right word to fill in a gap.

http://dramanauskaite.blogspot.com/

Doing vocabulary exercises was simple, I didn't have any difficulties at all, and I've learned a lot of professional vocabulary from it.

Summing up expressed opinions it may be concluded that students consider online activities useful not only in preparation for examination in ESP, but also for their future jobs.

7. Conclusions

This research identified two aspects of ESP teaching in 2 Lithuanian universities: first, students' perceptions of vocabulary online learning as a tool for self-checking its knowledge and usage, and second, comprehension of listening to professional online records.

In general, respondents are content with their class activities in doing online exercises and basically their attitudes depend on the types of exercises: students are quite positive about easy formats and rather negative about more difficult formats. However, students believe that collaborative learning in class is beneficial for developing communicative ability, which they will need in their future jobs. Statistical processing of the findings was conducted. Internal consistency reliability of responses has been computed by a means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The values of Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are found to be within the range of 0.74 to 0.87, which implies that obtained data are consistently reliable in spite of smallness of the investigated samples.

Computations of Spearman's correlation coefficients have shown that there are good correlations among students' responses of two universities at the significance levels either 0.05, i.e. at the probability of 95%, or 0.01, i.e. at the probability of 99%, and the values of Spearman's coefficients vary between 0.705 and 0.863. These results suggest that the relationships are not likely to be due to chance and may be extended beyond the studied samples.

According to students' feedback, application of online activities in ESP is highly recommended as it is less stressful, helps students to consolidate terminology within the professional context, and their performance is immediately evaluated, which gives students a feeling of satisfaction of having completed the task successfully.

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Appendix. Part of the designed questionnaire.

ONLINE VOCABULARY EXERCISES OF:

- Multiple choices are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Gap Fillings are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Open-ended questions are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Matching terms and definitions are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- True / False are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.

ONLINE LISTENING COMPREHENSION EXERCISES OF:

- True / False are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Synonym match are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Gap Fillings are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Written Questions are: 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.