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Do ESP Students Prefer Face-To-Face Instruction Over Digitally Embedded Instruction? Blogs vs. Reports? Debates vs. Online Discussion?

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Abstract

This paper is a part of the PhD study carried at the South East European University in Macedonia. So far, no relevant research has been done with the students at the SEEU regarding their expanding preferences for both in-class learning and technological resources for learning English. The author has attempted to determine how the technology can be optimally used to improve students' English language learning and increase their motivation and participation. In order to conduct this research and gather useful results, combined qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were used, such as classroom assignments, student questionnaires and structured interviews with randomly selected students. For the purpose of conducting the research one class of ESP students with compare-contrast types of digital literacy was used. The idea was for the author to create tasks that are similar but means to learning is different. This paper will focus on students' preferences in writing in-class reports vs. online blogs and in-class discussions vs. online discussions done in the SEEU's LMS. Instructors can provide the most beneficial learning environment for their students if they understand whether students prefer a digital learning environment, either in some situations, not at all, or always. The expected conclusions of the proposed study are as follows: 1. It is difficult to prove a statement that digital learning is always as effective as in-class instruction is. 2. The digital learning depends a great deal on students' initiative and motivation.

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1. Introduction

The learning in a digital environment as opposed to the one done in-class is the main subject of this research. In recent years, as there has developed a great interest in using technology (mainly computers, but now even smart phones and tablets) for language teaching and learning, autonomous learning has become a point of interest for both teachers and students. Especially with the advent of the Internet, the role of computers in language instruction has now become an important issue that great numbers of language teachers throughout the world must confront. It is evident that we should always be careful to use technology wisely in class. According to Richardson, teachers must “incorporate technology as seamlessly as possible. The technology is the means, not the content of the presentation. It should not overwhelm the lesson, but enhance it. If a non-technology-based means of presentation would be more effective, then by all means use it. The simplest, most intriguing tool to impart instruction is the best tool. Paper and pencil can sometimes be more effective than computer equipment - and paper does not crash!” (2004, p. 14).

When investigating the effectiveness of digital learning over the in-class instruction, it is more likely that the comparison can be made when the content in question is controlled. In this case, the researcher is the conveyor of the course and the sole responsible person for the course content.

Instructors can provide the most beneficial learning environment for their students if they understand whether students prefer a digital learning environment, either in some situations, not at all, or always.

An evidence-based understanding of students’ technological experiences is vital in informing higher education policy and practice. A thorough understanding of students’ technological experiences will have clear implications for areas such as student access, equity, and transition. Institutional decision-making associated with the management and administration of information and communications technologies – technological infrastructure support, resource investment, student and staff support – would also benefit from evidence about students’ existing experiences with technology. Finally, an investigation of students’ current technological experiences will have implications for ways in which technology could potentially be harnessed in pedagogically sound ways to improve teaching and learning (Kennedy, Judd, et.al. 2008, p. 108).

Technology can equip students to independently organize their learning process. Instead of being passive recipients of information, students using technology become active users. At the same time, technology transfers some responsibility for learning to students. Through online learning (which provides increased access to course content and better access to alternative education choices) and alternative media (such as digital games and project-based learning), students have the flexibility to direct their individual progress.

2. Literature Review

Since the early decades of this century, distance or virtual education has become an increasingly common alternative to classroom-based learning. Although digital education may provide an excellent opportunity to access education, this method is not ideal for everyone. Some researchers have indicated that the most preferred form of training delivery is still face-to-face. However, academic research generally suggests that digital learning outcomes are similar to traditional classroom settings (Beare, 1989; McCleary & Egan, 1989; Sonner, 1999).

Results from Bernard et al. (2004) and other reviews of the distance education literature (Cavanaugh 2001; Moore 1994) indicate no significant differences in effectiveness between distance education and face-to-face education, suggesting that distance education, when it is the only option available, can successfully replace face-to-face instruction. Findings of a job-related courses comparing Web-based and classroom-based learning (Sitzmann et al. 2006) even suggested that online learning is superior to classroom-based instruction in terms of declarative knowledge outcomes, with the two being equivalent in terms of procedural learning. Machtnes and Asher’s earlier (2000) analysis of online courses detected no difference between distance and face-to-face learning overall; they found results more favorable for online courses when classrooms had two-way, as opposed to one-way, interactions.

As a result, in the recent years an increased number of Universities offer online studies and online courses, guided by the idea that students born in a digital age may find in-person learning obsolete and demotivating. But, is this really true? To answer this question, Marc Prensky published his paper on a new generation of students: the ‘Digital Natives’. The basic thrust of Prensky’s argument was that a new group of students coming into universities was fundamentally different from any that educators had seen before. Digital Natives had “spent their entire lives

surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). Prensky maintained that the digital culture and environment in which the Digital Natives had grown up had changed the way they think: “It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors.” (p.1). Kvavik (2005) surveyed 4,374 freshman and senior college students and found they were frequent users of email, instant messaging, word processing and Internet browsing, just as Prensky did. Also Kvavik notes that, in addition, students are beginning to report use of word processing (often associated with coursework), and digital use varied by students’ majors. High levels of use and skill did not necessarily translate into preferences for increased use of technology in the classroom. Reproducing Kvavik’s earlier findings, other researchers again found that high levels of use and skill did not necessarily translate into preferences for increased use of technology in the classroom and that students prefer technology to a moderate degree and as a supplement in courses.

Prensky (2001) not only pointed to the supposed natural technological affinity and literacy of the Digital Natives, he also expressed concern at an apparent lack of technological literacy among educators. He labeled lecturers in higher education ‘Digital Immigrants’; foreigners in the digital lands of the Net Generation, and regarded the disparity between the Natives and the Immigrants as the “the biggest single problem facing education today” (p. 2). This radical claim has been tested and retested over the years among students worldwide. The question that educators are trying to answer is whether it is true that students are really “digital natives” when it comes to learning and whether educators are ‘digital immigrants’ when it comes to technology enhanced instruction.

However, educators need to avoid putting technology ahead of learning in their classrooms. In other words, educators should not be *technocentric* in their thinking (Egbert, 2005, p. 6). Although teachers can look around and find a vast choice of materials ready to be used in the classroom, it should be noted that the successful use of technology requires quality activities. The resources used should be meaningful and have a purpose that learners understand. The tools and resources that technology provides exposes students to a greater authenticity and improves their English skills. To provide authentic experiences, teachers at schools must plan activities that can meet a variety of knowledge levels, learning styles and life experiences. This is a valuable strength of the model for the students, but could be a weakness for the teacher. It may be difficult---even overwhelming---to access adequate resources.

Traditional textbooks are not going to meet these needs; the use of the Internet can be a solution. Undoubtedly, technology has its benefits but it can never be a replacement for a teacher in a face-to-face environment. Computers will not replace teachers because they cannot do most of the significant things teachers can: lesson planning, individual counseling, preparation and selection of materials, evaluation of process and product, and so on. Teachers of the future will perform the very same functions they do now, but will make use of technology to give students a richer, more stimulating learning environment. But as computers become new tools teachers will find that the technology demands new kinds of student-teacher relations: Students must become more autonomous, active learners, and teachers must relinquish some of their power and authority---not to the computer, but to the students themselves (Hanson-Smith, 1997, p. 3). For instance, Sottilo (2000) notes that in the hands of professors who know what they are doing, online instruction is superior to face-to-face instruction. It appears that synchronous electronic discourse is more efficient in terms of time on task than ordinary classroom discourse, and that a decrease in teacher domination of discussions creates more opportunities for the production of more complex language (p. 83). In this technological era, learners are different from learners of previous decades. Tapscott (2009) describes students today as the “Net Generation” Learners. They grow up with the technology, which crafts new norms and characteristics in their personalities. “They prize freedom of choice. They want to customize things.... They are natural collaborators, who enjoy a conversation, not a lecture.... They want fun, even at work and at school. Speed is normal. Innovation is part of life” (p. 6-7).

Many studies have been conducted to support the claim that technology tools used in EFL have positive effects on the students’ language proficiency. Huang (2012) stated that the use of CALL software facilitates vocabulary acquisition for EFL students. In addition, Cooper, Tsukada, Yamaguchi, and Naruse (2011) suggested that with the current increase of student numbers in the classrooms, students do not have the chance to speak and practice their

conversational skills. Thus, having a virtual interview with the computer via specific software will improve the students' communicative competency in English.

Given the fact that no such research has been done so far at SEEU, this particular study finds its value in this perspective.

3. The Methodology

There has not been lot of research done in Macedonia that takes the student's point of view to determine their preferences when faced with using technology to learn English. Most of the researches are based on the teachers' perception and how they implement technology in their teaching. This research is intended to show how the researcher applies technology in the instruction of EFL but, at the same time, investigates students' perceptions on whether they really learn better in a digital environment (the one, which according to Prensky, would be their 'natural' environment) or in an in-person learning environment. Which environment leads to better understanding and greater learning? This research aimed to establish a solid ground for further development of syllabus design especially in the field of ESP, taking both sides of the teaching/learning process into consideration. The key findings from the literature review on digitally enhanced learning in EFL classes will be provided in this paper in order to give background on the research done in this field and to show how it can be developed further. The importance of this study is the fact that it will impact not only the researcher's teaching as a foreign language lecturer, but also the instruction of other lecturers at SEE University and elsewhere since it has significant implications for EFL.

3.1. *Methods and techniques for collecting data*

In order to conduct this research and gather useful results, combined qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were used. The researcher examined surveys from distinguished experts about digital and in-person EFL instruction in order to design questionnaires that reflect questions from the current research. In addition, the strategies and activities that seem to be most research-based and that relate to both technology and autonomy were identified. By selecting and using some of these strategies and activities in my classes, I determined whether students recognize the need for digital learning environment by use of such strategies and activities.

The study used mixed methodologies because both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Moreover, by using a mixed method approach the research will be more valid and reliable because the data will be supported by both more structured research instruments (quantitative) and by providing more descriptive data (qualitative).

For the purpose of conducting the research one class of ESP 1 students with compare-contrast of types of digital literacy was used. The students were 15 in total, mixed gender, the majority was first year, and two of them were second year. They studied at the faculty of Computer Sciences and Technology and Business Informatics. The research was conducted at SEEU, more specifically at the Language Centre.

The idea was for the author to create tasks that are similar but means to learning is different. In that way, students' satisfaction and the extent to which they have learned particular item could be measured. That way objectivity and impartiality on the side of the students is provided. To achieve that, the following was implemented in class:

- Traditional lecture, taking notes or Kahn lecture, taking notes
- Writing report (traditional submission to teacher) vs. writing blog (non-traditional submission via digital posting to teacher + students)
- In class discussion vs. on-line discussion
- Read text vs. read at 1-2 websites (Treasure Hunt)– report learning
- Do activity in class vs. watch same activity on a video
- Learn set of vocabulary words in traditional manner vs. use vocabulary app online
- Rotate the tasks so that group 1 does traditional one time and group 2 does online learning that time.

Example: each group gets to try online app 3 times and traditional three times.

The study spread over one semester during the academic year 2015 which provided enough time for the students to get accustomed to the idea of studying from home as opposed to study in class. Moreover, the students were a crucial part of the research and their continuous feedback served as a basis for the study.

The author provided the same content, course materials, assignments and the same period for completing the tasks to both groups. They were all given the same pre and post learning questionnaire, writings and final exam. Additionally, both groups were required to participate in discussions (in-class or on LIBRI) and debates to develop skills for learning EFL and demonstrate mastery.

3.2. Writing report (traditional submission to teacher) vs. writing blog (non-traditional submission via digital posting to teacher + students)

When choosing these particular tasks, the researcher had two potential questions in mind:

1. What should good digital learning environments contain to stimulate and motivate students to learn?
2. Is the extent to which students use technology in their everyday life related to their preferences for their use of technology at the University?

The ultimate goal for every language teacher is to have motivated, challenge-driven, ready to learn students. Unfortunately, in numerous occasions, the worlds of the teachers and the students collide. Those are the worlds of Prensky's digital immigrants and digital natives.

How can we motivate our students? Motivation is one of the most important factors when it comes to learning a second language and especially learning that language in school. Different opinions occur regarding what is motivation and even more importantly how to motivate students to fully learn the language. Unfortunately, there is no universal way to achieve this, because the techniques that work in certain conditions with certain students do not necessarily give the same results in other conditions. However, by using what they are familiar with in our instruction can lead to greater motivation. Here is where digital environment plays its crucial role. Students play, communicate, share information mostly online using their smartphones, tablets, etc. Educators should find a way how to utilize their insatiable desire to be online for language learning purposes.

The ultimate goal in the classroom is letting go of the control on the side of the teacher and put more emphasis on the autonomy of the students.

In this particular case, students were required to write in-class report on what has been learned the previous two weeks. The reports shouldn't have followed any particular guidelines and should have been written in an informal style.

The blog was written in wordpress and the students had three posts, all written on a given topic previously agreed upon and written in an informal style as well. The blog was published and students could comment on each post.

I opted for this because I needed to compare the two types of writing and their effectiveness and motivational impact on students.

The data, however, has not been fully processed yet and I still don't have clear insight in what did they find more challenging and motivating. However, students' most interesting reaction was when they were given the option to write in class in an informal language. They have never done that in an English class before and they were excited to do it.

Based entirely on my perceptions and somewhat the interview I did with some students, I can say that the blog proved to be a really challenging task, far more exciting than the in-class writing.

3.3. In-class discussion vs. online discussion

The Learning Management System that was used for the online discussion is the one used at the SEEU named LIBRI. It is a system that has been in use for over 5 years and it is still constantly improving. The system can be only used by the SEEU students who get their credentials (user name/password) upon registering in their faculty.

The students were asked to participate in an online discussion forum and they were awarded points for that. The discussion forum followed after the in-class discussion on the topic that students chose themselves. However, the online discussion topic was chosen by the instructor.

The students' feedback and the participation suggested that students were not particularly interested in discussing on the proposed topic. The reasons for that will be known once the data is adequately processed. From previous experience, one can only guess that they lacked the motivation, external distractions had influence (since the task was done online); the topic was not of interest etc.

Compared to blogs, the situation with the discussion forum was slightly different. Here students enjoyed the in-class discussion far more than the online one. Probably the biggest reason for this is the immediate feedback and answer they get in class, as opposed to the delayed one on LIBRI. One cannot underestimate the power of the social interaction that goes on in the classroom as well.

4. The Results

After gathering the necessary data, the results will be analyzed by using the comparative analysis. Moreover, the data will be analyzed by comparing the findings from students' pre and post-learning questionnaires and student interviews when they were exposed to both types of instruction. Subsequently, through questionnaires, feedbacks and interview answers, I will find out if students are more satisfied and motivated when digital learning opportunities are applied and if digital instruction works for students at SEEU.

A comparative analysis is chosen for this research because in order to prove that digital instruction is an effective way to learn course content it is essential that digital instruction is compared with in-class learning.

The actual data analysis will be due in September, after the literature review is written and all the data is processed.

5. The Conclusion and Future Recommendations

The digital era has brought the "Anytime, anywhere" information environment. As a result, what constitutes 21st century literacies is of great interest. From new literacies (e.g., Leu et al., 2011), to multiliteracies (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), to digital literacies (e.g., Chase & Laufenberg, 2011), the landscape of teaching, learning, and even how we think in Web-mediated environments is under strong examination. Researchers worldwide are exploring the ways that technology can support and develop these literacies and effective learning activities in innovative ways.

However, no study can be perfect in its core. The expected limitations of this proposed study are as follows:

- It is difficult to prove a statement that digital learning is always as effective as in-class instruction is. At best, the study will show that the majority of the offered evidence suggests that digital learning is as effective, or, the evidence will disregard digital learning as a successful alternative to in-class instruction.
- The number of participants in the study is rather small. Only 15 full time students are involved in the research, but the significance of the study is supported by the qualitative methods used and the constant feedback both on the side of the instructor and the students.
- The digital learning depends a great deal on students' initiative and motivation. The learning is dependent on distractions that students are facing with when studying at home.

Although research conducted on digital instruction has been conducted in many places around the world, it is still not sufficiently done here in Macedonia. In particular, the correlation between the in-class learning and the learning in a digital environment and the effectiveness of the one over the other hasn't been adequately explored.

Hopefully, this research will shed some light on the way ESP students in Macedonia learn English and will provide us with sufficient data to further develop the syllabus following the newest technological advancements in the field of education.

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