LEARNERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF E-LEARNING

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Abstract. This article describes how students perceive the usefulness of e-learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at tertiary level. The research is based on the analysis of data obtained from the survey on learner attitudes to integrating online activities in the traditional English language classroom. The respondents are of five different specializations and study ESP either at University or College. The level of English proficiency is B2 or C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The learner responses to the statements of a specially designed questionnaire are analyzed by a means of Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) with the aim of determining correlations among different specializations, data reliability and statistical significance. The implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, attitudes to e-learning, respondents of different specializations, statistical treatment by SPSS.
Introduction

The notion of e-learning comprises all forms of electronically supported learning. The term refers either to out-of-classroom or in-classroom educational experiences via technology. Some people associate e-learning with an online course known as distance learning. However, the concept is broader and may include either full classroom learning with online support or the classic ‘blended learning’. Its classic definition means integrated combination of traditional learning with web based online activities.

This paper addresses research into learners’ perceptions of usefulness of online activities in the traditional English language classroom. The respondents have been either University or College students of five different specializations who study English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The outcome of this research is to identify if there are any correlations between responses depending on students’ specializations. The frequencies of responses to a specially designed questionnaire have been analyzed to find out if the responses vary within the different groups of the same specialization and whether there is resistance towards e-learning which might be due to the learner individual likes and dislikes. Statistical treatment of responses by a means of Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) is employed for the computations of Spearman correlation coefficients and Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients, which define reliability of the findings and their statistical significance.

The aim of the research: to study learner perceptions of e-learning of ESP in higher education.

Research methods employed: part of a specially designed questionnaire and statistical treatment of learner responses by a means of SPSS.

The respondents: students of five different specializations who study ESP either at Mykolas Romeris University or at the International School of Law and Business.

1. Literature Review

The number of publications related to online language teaching and learning has been growing since the beginning of the 21st century. The concept of e-learning is broad, ranging from the use of a virtual learning environment to desktop video conferencing; four types of courses are outlined: 1) a face-to-face course with about 70% done in a classroom, with online support; 2) a 50-50% course, the classic course of ‘blended learning’; 3) mainly an online course with 80% done over the internet, followed by infrequent classroom meetings; and finally 4) a fully online conducted course, or so called distance learning.

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This research focuses on blended learning, and therefore other types of e-learning are disregarded. One of the recent references on blended learning is by Sharma & Barret, who discuss techniques of blended learning in English language classrooms, offer practical ideas and suggestions for using technology and describe benefits and pitfalls in each method.

Blended learning has been in use for almost 20 years and its meaning has been constantly changing during this period.

Three definitions of blended learning are relevant in the world of education: a combination of face-to-face and online teaching, a combination of technologies and a combination of methodologies. The classic definition of the term is the integrated combination of traditional learning with web based online approaches, which is of interest in this article.

Due to the increased opportunities of the Internet, communicative activities of reading, writing, speaking and listening can be included. In order to make online teaching successful, some conditions must be satisfied, such as opportunities for learners to interact and negotiate meaning, interact in the target language, be involved in authentic tasks, work in a friendly environment without stress or anxiety, and teachers have to provide feedback to learners on their success and achievements.

There are a number of advantages of e-learning when compared to traditional face-to-face lectures, but there are some disadvantages as well. The most important advantages are: 1) learners can select learning materials themselves; 2) they can study anywhere with access to a computer and Internet connection and work at their own pace; 3) e-learning accommodates different learning styles and a variety of activities; 6) it develops ability to search for information and improves computer skills that is useful for lifelong learning. The major disadvantages of e-learning are: 1) learners with low motivation or bad study habits may fall behind; 2) students may get lost or confused about activities; 3) students may feel isolated from the instructor and classmates; 4) managing computer files and online learning software can sometimes seem complex for students with underdeveloped computer skills. Means et al argue that “a systematic search of the research literature from 1996 through July 2008 identified more than a thousand empirical studies of online learning. Analysts screened the studies to find those that (a) contrasted an online to a face-to-face condition, (b) measured student learning

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outcomes. 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. This finding suggests that the positive effects associated with blended learning should not be attributed to the media”.

The study of the factors that had lead most course participants to opt for face-to-face rather than online activities has revealed that resistance towards the e-learning mode is mainly due to cultural and logistic factors, and the reasons to choose online mainly lie in personal interests and motivation. J. Drennan with coauthors examined the factors affecting student satisfaction with flexible online learning and identified 2 key student attributes of student satisfaction: (a) positive perceptions of technology in terms of ease of access and use of online flexible learning material and (b) autonomous and innovative learning styles. Results suggest that student satisfaction is influenced by positive perceptions toward technology and an autonomous learning mode.

Students’ attitudes may change with the progress of learning. Nakoyama & Yamamoto examined Master and Bachelor students’ transitional assessment in a blended learning environment. It appeared that there are significant differences between Masters and Bachelors (p<0.01), however Bachelors have not revealed differences of opinions between the beginnings and the ends of their course. The major result is that most participants prefer online learning.

A longitudinal study of two streams that involved 174 students, who followed either blended or traditional face-to-face course, revealed that students in the blended section were significantly less negative about the course materials, personal achievements and technology than their counterparts.

In spite of a number of publications on e-learning, the aspect of learner perceptions of its benefits or drawbacks has not been examined. Our recent research identified learner perceptions of subject revision in the virtual Moodle environment. Respondents of two specializations, namely psychology (PS) and social work (SW), were involved. Although PS students were more positive than SW students, both streams agree on usefulness of learning in the Moodle environment as it is less stressful than traditional learning in class. Another recent study by one of the authors focused on blended learning in listening and published elsewhere. It emerged that the practice of blended listening

proved to be beneficial in the English for Psychology classes with two streams of the 1st and 2nd year students, who found it equally useful for improving their listening skills. The statistical processing of the students’ responses has shown that the data are reliable and not likely to be due to chance in spite of the limited number of respondents.

This paper focuses on learner perceptions of usefulness of e-learning in English for Specific Purposes classes and examines differences of attitudes of students’ responses depending on their specializations.

2. Research Methods and Respondents

The method of research includes part of a specially designed questionnaire on students’ perceptions of e-learning. The questionnaire was designed in accordance with accepted standards of constructing surveys\(^\text{14}\).

The way of gathering data employed administration of the questionnaire to different groups of respondents who study English for Specific Purposes at tertiary level. This is the most frequent method of identifying students’ opinions through self-reported data. The relevant part of the questionnaire consists of 5 statements (Appendix), to which students responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Statistical processing of the findings by a means of Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) included the following computations: Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients of reliability, frequencies of responses, Spearman’s correlation coefficients and the levels of significance. The participants in this study were 164 full-time 1st year students, who studied English for Law (2 groups, 27 students), English for Law & Management (4 groups, 48 students) at Mykolas Romeris University; English for Visual Communication (4 groups, 48 students), English for Hotel Management (2 groups, 26 students) and English for Business Management (1 group, 15 students) at the International School of Law and Business. The design of the English courses reflected the students’ needs in professional language, and the courses were adjusted to the requirements for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. The level of proficiency was B2 or C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

3. Results

The negative responses (strongly disagree and disagree) and positive responses (agree and strongly agree) have been added up for the sake of clarity in presenting the findings and presented in percentage. The neutral responses (not sure) are accounted for in statistical treatment, so further on the discussion will focus on analysis of the negative and positive responses. The frequencies of positive responses are shown in Chart 1 and those of negative responses are shown in Chart 2.

The 1st columns in both Charts display the responses of students who study Law, the 2nd columns – Law & Management, the 3rd columns – Business Management, the 4th columns – Visual Communication, and the 5th columns – Hotel Administration. The numbers of statements from 1 to 5 are displayed on X axis in accordance with the descriptions in Appendix. In order to make the examination of Charts easier, the statements of questionnaire are being reproduced below:

Statement 1: Individual learning online saves you embarrassment that you might feel in class for fear of being stupid.

Statement 2: Online learning gives you practical skills like web browsing and ability to search for information.

Statement 3: Online learning is useful for promoting lifelong learning skills.

Statement 4: Your success depends on your self-discipline – doing things on time.

Statement 5: Online learning in class is more enjoyable than on your own: you do not feel isolated.

At the first glance, there is no consistent pattern in learner responses either in Chart 1 or Chart 2. Consequently, in order to have a clear vision of possible regularities, it is essential to analyze the data statistically.
4. Statistical Approach

Statistical processing by a means of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) allows ascertaining how comparable and reliable the data are. Internal consistency reliability is usually estimated by computing Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient. The formula for the standardized Cronbach’s Alpha is \( \alpha = \frac{N \cdot r}{1 + (N - 1) \cdot r} \), here \( N \) is equal to the number of items, and \( r \)-bar is the average inter-term correlation among items. According to the theory\(^5\), results are reliable if the value of Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient is at least .70 or higher, which is considered acceptable in most Social Science research situations. The second step in correlational analysis is to figure out what type of correlation coefficients will be appropriate. Correlation coefficients are useful for understanding the degree of relationship between the data involved. The assumptions underlying the selection of the Pearson’s correlation include independence of samples, a normal distribution of data and a linear relationship between the results, while Spearman’s correlation requires only two assumptions - independence and linearity. In order to determine whether a correlation coefficient shows a real relationship, it is necessary to determine the probability of its significance, i.e. the value of sig \( p \). Statistical significance with \( p \) values of .01 or .05 indicates that there is only a 1 percent

or 5 percent probability that an observed correlation coefficient is a chance finding, in other words, it is meaningful. Once the statistical significance has been established, the meaningfulness of the correlation coefficient is dependent on its magnitude. Generally a correlation coefficient can range between negative one (-1.00) and positive one (+1.00). Positive coefficients indicate direct relationships, while negative coefficients indicate inverse relationships. The larger the coefficient, whether positive or negative, the stronger the relationship is, thus a correlation that is close to one, either positive or negative, indicates a very strong relationship, while coefficients that fall near zero indicate very weak relationships. The value of statistical significance of correlation coefficients is important for the interpretation of the relationship between two samples. It is accepted in Social Sciences that the value of $p$ equal to 0.05 means that the relationship is not likely to be due to chance. Larger than 0.05 values of the significance level, even if there is a correlation coefficient close to +1.00 or -1.00, mean that the probability of the significant relationship between two items is smaller than 95% and, therefore, the relationship is likely to be random.

5. Statistical Processing of Data

The responses have been processed statistically using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Internal consistency reliability has been estimated by computing Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient. As it has already been mentioned above, the value of Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient must be at least .70 or higher, which is considered acceptable in most Social Science research situations. In our case, $N = 164$ and there are 5 variables, i.e. 5 samples of different specializations, and the computed value of Cronbach’s Alpha is equal to .748 for positive and .880 for negative responses. Therefore, the obtained results are reliable. The normality of responses has been checked by computing Kolmogorov-Smirnov Tests for all samples. In all cases, test distributions have been normal. Thus, computation of Pearson’s correlation coefficients makes sense. Spearman’s correlation coefficients have also been computed with the aim of comparing linearity and significance levels. As a rule, these coefficients are denoted by the abbreviation rho. The results in Table 1 demonstrate Spearman’s and in Table 2 Pearson’s correlations, respectively, for different samples of respondents. The names of respondents’ samples are shown in the first vertical column and the first horizontal row, so the same data may be seen twice at their intersections.

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17 Ibid.
Table 1. Spearman’s rho and Sig. p (positive responses)

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<td>-.821</td>
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<td>-.100</td>
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<td>.089</td>
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<td>.873</td>
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<td>.500</td>
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<td>.975(**)</td>
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<td>.391</td>
<td>.219</td>
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<td>.873</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.553</td>
<td>.285</td>
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** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

It can be seen from Table 1 that the Spearman’s correlation coefficient is equal to .975 and its level of significance is 0.01 for the positive responses of groups of Hotel Administration (H. Adm.) versus Law & Management (L & M). The relationships among other groups demonstrate very large sig p and, according to the theory, should be interpreted as accidental. However, according to Table 2, at the significance levels of 0.05 there is a linear relationship between the responses of two samples: L & M versus Visual Communication (Vis. Com.) with the Pearson correlation coefficient of .893(*) and L & M versus Hotel Administration with the Pearson correlation coefficient of .946(*). Similarly as in Table 1, there are no conspicuous relationships among other groups or respondents. The results in Table 1 and Table 2 are not controversial because of the different sig p.

Table 2. Pearson’s rho and Sig. p (positive responses).

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<td>.015</td>
<td>.298</td>
<td>.149</td>
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* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Table 3 displays Spearman’s correlation coefficients computed for negative responses. Here, perfect correlations between the following pairs of respondents: Law versus Law & Management (L & M), Law versus Business Management (BM), Visual Communication (Vis. Com.) versus Hotel Administration (H. Adm.) with correlation coefficients equal to 1.000 and significance level 0.01 (the probability 99%) may be observed.

**Table 3.** Spearman’s rho and Sig. *p* (negative responses).

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<td>1.000</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.000(**)</td>
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**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

Table 4 shows Pearson’s correlation coefficients and significance levels computed for negative responses of all groups of respondents. Here, correlation coefficients are smaller than in Table 3, but there are more significant relationships at the lower probability of 95% (Sig *p* 0.05), namely .957(*) for Law versus Business Management (BM), .893(*) for Visual Communication (Vis. Comm.) versus Law & Management (L & M) and .921(*) for Visual Communication (Vis. Comm.) versus Hotel Administration (H. Adm.). All these relationships are significant, i.e. not accidental. In other words, the respondents in these groups share the same views.

**Table 4.** Pearson rho and Sig. *p* (negative responses)

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<td>.957(*)</td>
<td>.507</td>
<td>.379</td>
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<td>.974(**)</td>
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<td>.005</td>
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To sum up the statistical analysis of responses by 5 groups of respondents, it should be emphasized that learners of different specializations share similar opinions on e-learning as there are high values of correlation coefficients between some groups at the significance levels of 0.01 or 0.05 (the probabilities of 99% or 95%).

**Conclusions**

This research has identified learner perceptions of usefulness of e-learning at tertiary level. In general, its application in teaching English for Specific Purposes is beneficial. Respondents of different specializations are either positive or negative towards various aspects of e-learning and their perceptions depend on their specialization (Chart 1 and Chart 2). Statistical processing of learner responses has shown that the values of Cronbach’s Alpha for each specialization vary from .748 to .880, which means that obtained results are reliable. The investigation of correlation relationships among groups has demonstrated that there are linear relationships between the responses on e-learning at the significance levels of 0.05 or 0.01, i.e. the probability is either 95% or 99%, respectively. It implies that the obtained data are not accidental and could be extended beyond the studied samples of respondents. Since e-learning has become mandatory in higher education, the blended learning is highly recommended as it is acceptable to many students.

**References**


Appendix. Questionnaire on Students’ Attitudes to Learning Online

– Individual learning online saves you embarrassment that you might feel in class for fear of being stupid.
  1) completely disagree; 2) disagree; 3) not sure; 4) agree; 5) completely agree.

– Online learning gives you practical skills like web browsing and ability to search for information.
  1) completely disagree; 2) disagree; 3) not sure; 4) agree; 5) completely agree.

– Online learning is useful for promoting lifelong learning skills.
  1) completely disagree; 2) disagree; 3) not sure; 4) agree; 5) completely agree.

– Your success depends on your self-discipline – doing things on time.
  1) completely disagree; 2) disagree; 3) not sure; 4) agree; 5) completely agree.

– Online learning in class is more enjoyable than on your own: you do not feel isolated.
  1) completely disagree; 2) disagree; 3) not sure; 4) agree; 5) completely agree.
STUDENTŲ POŽIŪRIAI Į E. MOKYMA(-SI)

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Santrauka. E. mokymo(-si) samprata apima visas elektroninio mokymo formas, įtraukiant ir auditorinę bei neauditorinę veiklą. Dažnai e. mokymas(-is) asocijuojasi su nuotoliniu, tačiau taikytis galimi ir atvejus, kai paplito hibridinis („blended“) mokymas(-is), kurio klasikinis supratimas apima virtualinio ir tradicinio mokymo metodų suderinimą.

Šis straipsnis nagrinėja studentų požiūrius į anglų specialybės kalbos e. mokymo(-si) naudingumą. Tyrimas remiasi studentams pateiktų anketai gautų atsakymų analize. Respondentai buvo Mykolo Romerio universiteto ir Tarptautinės teisės ir verslo kolegijos 5 skirtingų specializacijų studentai. Jų anglų kalbos lygis atitiko B2 ar C1 standartus pagal Common European Framework of References for Languages. Respondentų teigiamai ir neigiamai atsakymai į specialiai parengtą apklausos anketą buvo analizuojami naudojant statistinį programinės įrangos paketą SPSS (Software Package for Social Sciences). Nustatyta, kad Cronbach Alpha koeficientai yra nuo 0,748 iki 0,880, t. y. gauti rezultatai yra patikimi. Spearman bei Pearson koreliacijos koeficientai rodo, kad respondentų atsakymai yra proporcingi, kai reikšmingumo lygis yra 0,01 arba 0,05, t. y. jų tikimybės yra 99 % arba 95 %

Apibendrinus gautus tyrimo rezultatus, rekomenduojama taikyti hibridinio mokymo(-si) metodiką anglų specialybės kalbos pratybose.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: dalykinė anglų kalba, požiūriai į e. mokymąsi, skirtingų specialybės respondentai, statistinis duomenų apdorojimas SPSS metodu.

Galina Kavaliauskienė, Mykolo Romerio universiteto Humanitarinių mokslų instituto Užsienio kalbų katedros docentė. Mokslinių tyrimų kryptys: specialybės anglų kalbos mokymas(is): studentų savianalizė, vertimo problemas, mokymo(-si) kokybė, mokymosi visa gyvenimą veiksniai, Moodle aplinkos taikymas anglų kalbos pratybose, virtualios aplinkos įtaka mokymui(-si).

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