Do students really want to learn English online?

Abstract

Over the last two decades higher education institutions have rapidly increased their online presence to the extent that most university topics now have compulsory online components and many degrees can be fully studied externally. Although distant education might have numerous advantages for specific cohorts of students (for example, rural, working, or mature students), learning online might not be the preferred or the most suitable mode for every student (Paechter & Maier, 2010). While universities are increasingly making significant investments in digitalising their learning and teaching resources, students' attitudes towards using online English language learning materials and their preferences for specific types of materials are often overlooked (Selwyn, 2016). This paper presents the pilot study of a project which aims to evaluate students' attitudes towards learning English and their motivations for using online English language learning resources. The 15 participants were students who in 2016 attended the English Language Support Program (ELSP) offered every semester by Flinders University to non-English speaking background (NESB) students. The ELSP consists of six modules that focus on developing NESB students' English language skills for the academic context throughout their studies. In response to student demand for additional language support, the program has created online resources to supplement the face-to-face teaching in each module. However, as the ELSP is a free support program, a study was initiated to determine whether the ELSP should include further online materials to supplement the classroom language instruction and if so, to determine students' preferences to inform the design of new online materials. Quantitative method was employed to obtain feedback regarding students' preferences, perceptions and motivations of online language learning use. The questionnaire consists of demographic and student preferences questions, as well as modified items from standardised instruments developed by Tuan, Chin and Shieh (2005). In general, the results from the pilot study show that the interest in using online language learning materials to improve English is positive (73.3%) and students expressed that they are likely to use the site and recommend it to their friends (86.7%). The feedback also reveals barriers to online language learning, reasons for using online language learning sites, and the type of online methodology preferred for language learning. While the study is only at an early stage, the pilot test results have provided insightful information, which we hope will be reinforced in the final survey, to assist us in customising our digital ELSP resources materials according to students' preferences.

References

Paechter, M., & Maier, B. (2010). Online or face-to-face? Students' experiences and preferences in e-learning. The Internet and higher education, 13(4), 292-297. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2010.09.004

Selwyn, N. (2016). Digital downsides: exploring university students' negative engagements with digital technology. Teaching in Higher Education, 21(8), 1006-1021. doi:10.1080/13562517.2016.1213229

Tuan, H. L., Chin, C. C., & Shieh, S. H. (2005). The development of a questionnaire to measure students' motivation towards science learning. International Journal of Science Education, 27(6), 639-654. doi:10.1080/0950069042000323737