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Web 2.0 in learning English: the student perspective

Elmaziye Özgür Küfi[a]*, Birikim Özgür[b]

[a]*Eastern Mediterranean University, Gazimağusa, North Cyprus*
[b]*Near East University, Nicosia, North Cyprus*

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Abstract

Although literature is rich in discussions on technology integration in the learning process, very few studies elaborate on the effectiveness of the most recent web-based tools from the student perspective. As the target audience to benefit from the use of web-based tools is learners, their perceptions play a significant role in their successful implementation. Based on this rationale, the present study aimed to develop a comprehensive insight into two hundred freshman students' perceptions regarding the use of an interactive web environment in English communication courses offered by the department of General Education at Eastern Mediterranean University. The study made use of a mixed method approach and the participants' perceptions were elicited through the use of a questionnaire which included open-ended questions to collect qualitative data and also structured questions which required the collection of quantitative data. Responses given to open-ended questions were analyzed through coding the statements and responses to structured questions were analyzed by calculating the frequencies. The analysis of data shows that the majority of students is positive about the use of an interactive web environment and find its use beneficial for their learning.

Keywords: Web 2.0; web based tools; interactive web environments; constructivism; learning english; english language teaching .

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1. Introduction

We are living in an era of knowledge explosion. As new developments take place everyday, there is far too much information to memorize, which makes it necessary for learners to be "information managers" rather than "information regurgitators" (Matusevish, 1995, p. 2). On the one hand, technology can be blamed for contributing to this enormous amount of information by spreading it at a fast rate but on the other hand, it can be thanked for providing the appropriate tools for facilitating the management of excessive information. Thus, the following words of Duffy and Cunninggham (1996) are quite true for the use of technology in today's world: "Culture creates the tool but the tool changes the culture" (p. 180). Using the tools technology provides, it is now possible to turn instruction into a dynamic process where learners are actively engaged in knowledge construction. In other words, as Matusevich (1995) points out, the effective use of technological tools may lead to "a fundamental shift away from didactic techniques to a unifying constructivist framework" (p. 1). Similarly, Nanjappa and Grant (2003) state that "a complementary relationship exists between technology and constructivism, the implementation of each one benefiting the other" (p. 1). According to them, the aim of both constructivism and technology is to create a learning environment where learners may interact with each other in creating knowledge. Obviously, this aim was not defined in one day, it is the outcome of a series of developments over time. When early educational practices are considered for example, it can be seen that they involved one way flow of information from the teacher to the students. Today, this practice is harsly criticized and is defined as "filling the bucket". Constructivists think that this exercise should be replaced to emphasize student motivation in the learning process and renamed as "lighting the flame" (Airasian and Walsh, 1997, p. 446).

A similar shift can be observed in the use of technological resources. Due to developments in information technology, the range of tools which provide learning opportunities outside school has also changed greatly in the recent years. Web 1.0 tools which have been used for creating web-sites as "the Web-as-information-source" for many years are not very popular today. Current Web 2.0 tools, which are based on the concept of "Web-as-participation-platform", seem to be preferred by many educationalists (Web 2.0, 2008). These powerful tools enable contemporary teachers to provide richer and more exciting learning environment for their students (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996, p. 187), to shift from whole class to small group instruction, to be coaches instead of lecturers, to support weaker students instead of the brighter ones, to actively involve students in the learning process, to create more cooperative and less competitive relations among students, to individualize the learning process and to integrate visual and verbal thinking instead of only focusing on verbal thinking processes (Matusevich, 1995, pp. 2-3).

These tools can be of great assistance in language learning as well but as Kern (2006) claims "it is not technology per se that affects the learning of language and culture but the particular uses of technology. This emphasis on use highlights the central importance of pedagogy and the teacher" (p. 200). While this argument underlines the important role teachers play in the successful integration of technology into language teaching, an interesting question emerges: 'What do students think about the use of the most recent web-based tools in their language learning experiences?'

Despite all our sophistication with technological tools and information gathering techniques, in the context of the present study, we often fail to ask our students *their* views regarding *their* own learning experiences. If we want our students to benefit from the recent technological and educational developments, we should take their perceptions into consideration and try to learn from their experiences. With this rationale in mind, the following study aimed to ask the opinions of two hundred freshman students about the use of an interactive web environment in English Communication courses offered by the department of General Education at Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU). To this end, the research questions are provided in the findings section.

2. Method

This study employed a survey method to examine the perceptions of first year EMU students concerning the use of interactive web environment in learning English. Although the medium of instruction at the university is English, it is a fact that many students have language problems and the only formal opportunity provided to them to improve their academic language skills is the English Communication (ENGL191 and 192) courses which are offered only four hours a week. As it is very difficult to provide extensive language support in four hours, the study aimed to extend students' language learning experiences beyond the classroom and class/school hours through the use of an interactive web environment and to understand if its use facilitates learning English by investigating the advantages and disadvantages of using an interactive web environment from the participating students' perspective.

The study sample consisted of 200 freshmen students, mostly aged 18-20. The participants were students of teachers who created an interactive web environment for their classes using either of the two recent web 2.0 software applications; wiki or moodle. Wiki is simple collaborative editing software application which encourages users to be not only readers, but also content providers and editors. Similarly, moodle is an e-learning software platform but unlike wiki it has to be mounted on a server and has a more sophisticated array of tools, including blogs, chat, messaging, discussions, new announcements and questionnaires.

Views of 200 students were elicited by means of a questionnaire written in English. Half of the respondents were students who had experience with 'wiki' and the other half were students who had experience with 'moodle'. As the study sample included some students whose English language proficiency was not very high, the Turkish version of the questionnaire was also provided. In this

way, misunderstanding on the part of the students and misinterpretation of the subsequent data collected by the researchers could be avoided. The questionnaire included ten questions. Some of these questions were open-ended but some of them were structured questions which required students to respond using a likert type scale. Using this scale, students could agree, disagree, or express uncertainty concerning the given statements. Some questions also included sub-questions.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, the questions were carefully planned. In order to overcome any threats to content validity, the sections of instrument were designed after a careful review of the existing surveys in literature. Moreover, six experienced instructors (four from the department of General Education and two from the Education Faculty) examined the survey to confirm the appropriateness of the questions, answers, and categories to strengthen the content as well as the format of the instrument. Also, the survey design was considered carefully to overcome any face validity threats through examining the existing technology instruments in literature. The internal consistency issue was covered by piloting the instrument with some students taking ENGL courses prior to its wide scale administration. Cronbach's alpha was determined as 0.85.

The responses of 200 students were collected through the questionnaires which were returned to the researchers the same day the students completed the questionnaires. This study is limited to selected ENGL course students in the 2006-2007 academic year. The data was analyzed by the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software. Data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by using 'descriptive statistics'. Frequency and percentage techniques were used to indicate the level of each item. Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data provided by students as explanations for their responses.

3. Findings and Results

What are participating students' perceptions regarding the use of interactive web environments in learning English?

A question (the first question) was included in the questionnaire to differentiate students who used 'wiki' from those who used 'moodle'. However, the analysis showed that the views of students in each group were quite parallel and thus the perceptions of these two groups of students are reported all together in this section. The detailed analysis of responses given to each question by two hundred students can be seen in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, the analysis of student responses shows that half of the students think learning English is more fun with the use of an interactive environment and it helps them to improve their English. About one third of all students are not sure if they enjoy learning English through the use of an interactive web environment or if it helps them to improve their English. However, as only a small minority of students expresses negative views about the effects of using an interactive web environment on their learning, it can be stated that the majority of students are positive about the use of an interactive web environment and find its use beneficial for their learning.

Table 1. Findings Related to the Effects of Using an Interactive Web Environment on Learning English

Item	Response (%)		
	Agree	Not Sure	Don't Agree
1. I enjoyed learning English by using wiki / mooodle (n=199)	52	34	13.5
2. The interactive web environment created for my ENGL course (by the use of wiki/moodle) helped me to improve my English. (n=199)	52.5	34	13

These results are confirmed when the analysis of student views related to the advantages of using an interactive web environment are considered. The analysis of student responses about the advantages of using an interactive web environment can be seen from the Table 2.

What are the advantages of using an Interactive Web Environment according to the participating students?

Table 2 shows that a great majority of students think using an interactive web environment has advantages in various ways. Students who said that they felt more active while learning in an interactive web environment (33.5% of all the participating students) explained their responses by providing reasons such as "I can learn vocabulary with my friends and my instructor. We can work together on word forms and construct sentences using the new words that we learnt. In this way, we improve our vocabulary knowledge", "I have access to an infinite number of resources on the internet and I can benefit from other sites. One example is the concordance page that we can link to from our class page" or " I can learn in my convenient time".

Table 2. Findings Related to the Advantages of Using an Interactive Web Environment

Item	Response (%)		
I think the use of wiki / moodle includes the following advantages:	Agree	Not sure	Don't Agree

a.	Getting further information about the course outside class hours (n=197)	83	13	2.5
b.	Asking questions to the teacher outside class hours (n=199)	62.5	25.5	11.5
c.	Holding a discussion with class mates on a specific topic (n=199)	39	34.5	26
d.	Getting guidance and feedback from the teacher outside class hours (n=198)	69.5	23.5	6
e.	Learning together with friends (e.g. keeping an on-line class vocabulary notebook instead of a personal vocabulary notebook. (n=194)	49.5	32.5	15
f.	Handing in HW / portfolios online	70	14	16
g.	Doing extra activities to improve my English in general or doing extra exam practice before the exams (n=199)	60.5	32.5	6.5

What is interesting about the data given in Table 2 is the results of items c and e. Although these activities included the most constructivist and peer-orientated elements, they got the lowest responses. Surprisingly, all the other activities which can be considered more 'teacher-centered', informational and traditional got higher responses. This finding should lead to the questioning of the way interactive web environments are exploited to support learning in the present research context.

In the study, some students (28% of all the respondents) reported that they felt more passive in an interactive web environment and explained why they felt so by giving reasons like "I prefer learning in a face to face environment", "I don't have a computer" or "Having access to the internet is a problem". The reasons respondents provided seem to mainly result from lack of certain facilities like not having a computer or access to the internet. In addition, it is assumed that students' learning style, computer skills or their learning habits may affect their perceptions regarding the use of an interactive web environment while learning English. The analysis of students' responses provided in Table 3 shows that only a small group of students think that the use of an interactive web environment involves disadvantages.

What are the disadvantages of using an interactive web environments according to the participating students?

Table 3 clearly shows that the majority of students do not think that the use of an interactive web environment involves many disadvantages. They seem to be displeased about only one thing and that is the fact that internet is too slow.

As the analysis of student views shows, the majority of students are happy about using an interactive web environment while learning English but there is a small group of students who prefer classroom teaching to learning in an interactive web environment. This is also confirmed by the analysis of student responses to the last question in the questionnaire which shows that more than half of the students (52.5%) advise other students to make use of an interactive environment in their English courses and only a small group of students (11.5 %) do not advise other students to use interactive web environments.

Table 3. Disadvantages of Using an Interactive Web Environment

Item		Response (%)		
	In your opinion, what kind of disadvantages does the use of wiki / moodle involve?	Agree	Not Sure	Don't Agree
a.	Wiki / moodle is difficult to use as it requires knowledge of technical skills (n=193)	14	24	58.5
b.	I don't feel a part of class when I am using wiki / moodle (n=193)	17	24	56.5
c.	I can't understand the online tasks easily (n=199)	11.5	21.5	64.5
d.	I don't like to read on the computer (n=194)	20	17.5	60
e.	I cannot find a proper computer to work on at the university (n=196)	25	21.5	51.5
f.	The internet is too slow (n=196)	63	18	17

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

While the data can only be considered as a preliminary reflection of students' awareness of interactive web environment use in learning English, analysis results imply that students can be more active in these environments because everything is in their own control; if they want to learn, they choose the activity they like from the provided activities and also get the taste of learning from and with their peers. According to the students, the nice thing about these environments is the fact that they can learn without getting bored. For example, a student says that entering this environment and doing the activities in it have become his/her hobby and as a result, his/her interest in the course has increased. Similarly, another student says "I definitely advise my friends to use an interactive web environment because it makes learning of ENGL easier and plus one is surrounded with great deal of information". These student expressions confirm what Mitra and Steffensmeier (2000) say about student attitudes towards computer use "…computer enrichment has a series of positive outcomes on the attitudes toward the process of learning, which in turn can have a positive

outcome on learning itself" (p. 431). Although data results are mostly positive, the study reveals some shortcomings and highlights a couple of important issues.

Firstly, findings point to the lack of certain facilities in the research context such as a computer at home/ dormitory or access to the internet. Thus, as Lewin (2004) notes "provision should be made for out-of-school access for those without technologies in the home" (p. 152). In other words, technological facilities should be made available to all students prior to a wide scale implementation process. Secondly, the findings reveal that there is a small group of students who prefer classroom teaching to learning in an interactive web environment. The ideas of these students should not be ignored because they are just a minority. In contrast, teachers should make clear to these students that the intention of using an interactive web environment is not to replace classroom teaching but just to provide them more learning opportunities and to help them become active and autonomous learners.

Study findings show that optimum learning opportunities can be created for language learners through the use of interactive web environments but as noted by Kern (2006) earlier, teachers have a very significant role to play in this scenario. As a result, before making any strong remarks, several questions have to be answered: Are teachers really aware of the fact that by integrating an interactive web environment into their teaching, they are maximizing learning opportunities and "providing opportunities for learners to experience 'flow' will facilitate greater levels of concentration, motivation, engagement and learning"?, Do teachers genuinely want to allow "pupils to be creative, flexible and direct their own 'learning projects'?" (Lewin, 2004, p.152) or are they just traditionalizing interactive web environments and using them as an alternative mode of giving extra work to students and actually providing very little choice to them in their learning processes?

A study conducted in the same research context with high school science teachers draws the following conclusion: teachers "need to change their views about technology resources" (Isman, Yaratan, and Caner, 2007). This assertion shows that we need to question our practices with technological tools. Similarly, Laurillard (2008) says "if the teaching community can work together to problematise this potentially radical innovation, then there is some hope that it will proceed in the best interests of learners" (p. 360). Based on these discussions and the findings of this study, we feel the need to make an urgent call to not only teachers but everyone involved in education to seriously consider Lewin's (2004) following suggestion: "the curriculum, assessment practices and educational policies need radically reshaping, to become more flexible and less structured, giving greater autonomy to the learner and their community and blurring the boundaries between formal and informal learning" (p. 152). We think that current Web 2.0 tools can successfully be integrated in the teaching-learning processes and students' learning can be facilitated to a great extent if educators are prepared to follow this advice.

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