ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: E-LEARNING

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Abstract

Online learning has gained popularity due to technology progress. The concept of online learning comprises all forms of electronically supported learning. The term is used to refer to the out-of-classroom and in-classroom educational experiences via online technology. Its classic definition means the integrated combination of traditional learning with web based online approaches.

This article examines students' perceptions and attitudes to integrating online activities in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) language classroom. The respondents in this study have been the University students of two different specializations, namely students who study either Law or Law & Management. The specially designed questionnaire has been administered to the two samples of respondents. The data have been analyzed statistically by a means of a Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). It has been established that the frequencies of the positive and the negative responses do not only depend on the respondents' specialization but also differ within the different groups of the same specialization. The findings mean that there is resistance towards online learning which might be due to students' individual likes and dislikes. Statistical treatment of the students' responses allows determining the degree of the strength of relationships as well as their statistical significance. No linear relationship has been found for the positive responses between both samples. A linear relationship between negative responses of studied samples has been found at the significance level of .009, i.e. the probability of 99%, which indicates that the findings may be extended beyond the examined limited number of respondents.

Key words: English for Specific Purposes**,** online learning, respondents of different specializations, statistical treatment by SPSS.

Introduction

Online learning has become popular due to technology progress and one of its greatest benefits is flexibility. The concept of online learning comprises all forms of electronically supported learning. The term is most likely utilized to reference out-of-classroom and in-classroom educational experiences via technology. Majority of people associate online learning with an online course or so called 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 approaches.

This paper aims at examining students' attitudes to integrating e-activities in the traditional English for Specific Purposes classroom without emphasis on any particular language skill and drawing conclusions about suitability of e-learning at the university level.

The aims of the research: to investigate students' attitudes towards e-learning ESP at the tertiary level.

Research methods used: 1) a specially designed questionnaire to examine students' opinions on learning English via online activities; 2) statistical processing of the responses by the means of Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The respondents in this study are the University students of two different specializations, Law versus Law and Management, who study English at the Faculty of Law, Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Literature background

The number of publications related to online language teaching and learning has been growing, but most of them fail to provide good examples of practical online activities (Meskill & Anthony, 2010). According to Hockly & Clandfield (2010), the concept is broad, ranging from the use of a virtual learning environment to desktop video conferencing. Four different kinds of course are outlined: 1. mainly face-to-face, so 70% done in a classroom, with online support; 2. 50-50, the classic 'Blended learning' course; 3. mainly online, so 80% done over the internet, with infrequent classroom meetings; 4. and a fully online course, or so called distance learning. One of the popular references on blended learning is by Sharma & Barret (2007). It focuses on using blended learning techniques in English language classrooms, offers practical ideas and suggestions for using technology in the classroom and describes benefits and pitfalls of each method. Three definitions of "blended learning" are relevant in the world of education (Sharma, 2010): the classic definition of the term means the integrated combination of traditional learning with web based online approaches, while two other definitions refer to either a combination of technologies or methodologies. Due to the increased opportunities of the Internet, all language skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening - can be practiced (Chinnery, 2010). Continuing advances in the Internet technology will most likely affect the profession of teaching languages in the future. 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 (Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith, 1999). By applying these principles to online communication activities, the new technologies have become optimal tools for enhancing students' second language acquisition.

Apart from a number of advantages of computer-based learning, there are some disadvantages as well (eLearner, online reference). Here are some important advantages: 1) students can select learning materials according to their level of knowledge and interest; 2) students can study anywhere with access to a computer and Internet connection; 3) students can work at their own pace; 4) e-learning fosters more interaction among students and instructors; 5) e-learning can accommodate different learning styles and facilitate learning through a variety of activities; 6) it develops knowledge of the Internet and computers skills that is useful for lifelong learning. The major disadvantages are: 1) learners with low motivation or bad study habits may fall behind; 2) without the routine structures of a traditional class, 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.

According to Means et al (2009), "a systematic search of the research literature since 1996 has identified more than a thousand empirical studies of online learning. Analysts screened these studies to find those that (a) contrasted an online to a face-to-face condition, (b) measured student learning outcomes. As a result of this screening, 51 independent effects were identified that could be subjected to analysis. The 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 online mode is mainly due to cultural and logistic factors (Manca et al.). Reasons to choose online, instead, mainly lie in personal interest and motivation. J. Drennan with coauthors (2005) 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.

In spite of a number of publications on learning online, the aspect of learners' perceptions of its benefits or drawbacks has not been adequately examined. My research into blended learning in online listening was published in the ESP World Internet Journal (Kavaliauskienė, 2011). The practice of blended listening has 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 and consolidating professional vocabulary. 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 article examines the attitudes to online learning in ESP classes of two different specializations, namely Law vs. Law & Management, and draws conclusions on respondents' perceptions.

Respondents and research techniques

The participants in this research are 75 full-time 1st year students, who study English for Law (2 groups, 27 students) and English for Law & Management (4 groups, 48 students) at Mykolas Romeris University. The design of the ESP course reflects the students' needs in professional language. The course is adjusted to the requirements for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. The students' level of proficiency was 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 e-learning. The questionnaire was designed in accordance with accepted standards of constructing surveys (Dornyei, 2003). The way of gathering data employed administration of the questionnaire to two different samples of respondents who study English for Specific Purposes on a tertiary level. Self-reported data is the most frequent technique of identifying students' attitudes. The relevant part of the questionnaire consists of 7 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: frequencies of responses, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of reliability, the Means and the Standard Deviations for the responses of two samples of respondents, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to check the normality of data distribution and Pearson's correlation coefficients.

Results and discussion

For the sake of clarity in presenting the findings, the negative responses (strongly disagree and disagree) and positive responses (agree and strongly agree) have been added up. Naturally, the neutral responses have been accounted for in the statistical treatment, so further on the discussion will be focused on the analysis of negative and positive responses. The frequencies of positive responses in percentage are shown in **Chart 1** and of negative responses – in **Chart 2**. The 1st columns in both Charts represent the data expressed by students who study Law, and

the 2nd columns – by students who study Law and Management. The numbers of statements from 1 to 7 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
Learning time is flexible: you can do it at any time that is convenient to you.
Statement 2
Your family or friends might get involved in your learning and help you.
Statement 3
Individual learning online saves you embarrassment that you might feel in class for fear of being stupid.
Statement 4
Online learning gives you practical skills like web browsing and ability to search for information.
Statement 5
Online learning is useful for promoting lifelong learning skills.
Statement 6
Your success depends on your self-discipline – doing things on time.
Statement 7
Online learning in class is more enjoyable than on your own: you do not feel isolated.

Chart 1. Frequencies of Positive Responses of Law students (1st columns) and Law & Management students (2nd columns) versus the Statements of the Questionnaire.
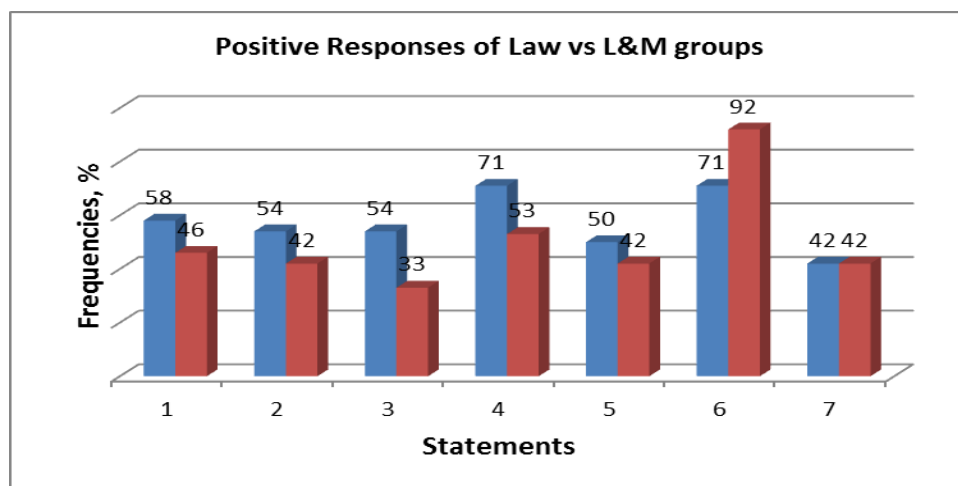
The data in **Chart 1** demonstrate that the frequencies of the positive responses of Law students slightly exceed the frequencies of the responses of the students who study Law & Management, except the Statement 6. Such insignificant discrepancy between the responses of two samples is hard to explain. Students in both samples are approximately in the same age group, i.e. in their twenties, and do not have any working experience as they entered University after having finished schools.

Chart 2. Frequencies of Negative Responses of Law students (1st columns) and Law & Management students (2nd columns) versus the Statements of the Questionnaire
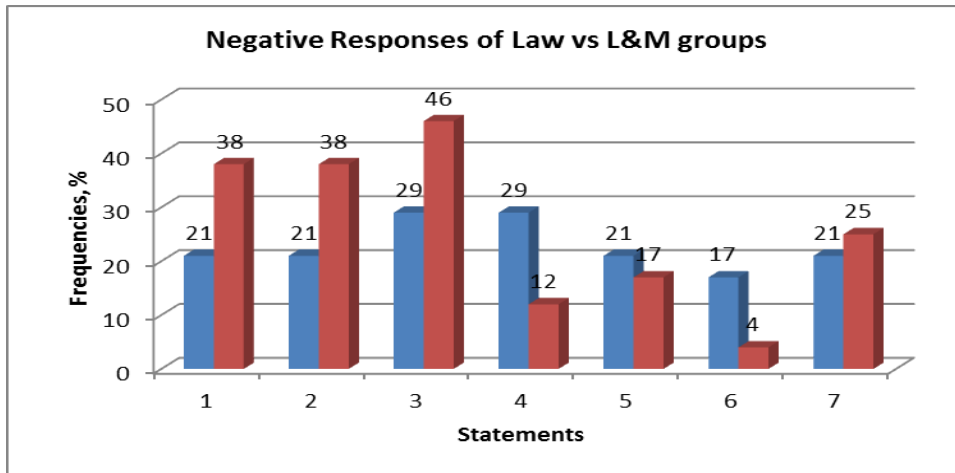
Chart 2 displays the negative responses of two samples. For the statements of 1, 2, 3 and 7, the students of Law & Management are more negative that students of Law, while for the statements 4, 5, and 6 – it is just the opposite.

Comparing the data in **Chart 1** and **Chart 2**, it seems as if the disparity of responses might be due to the respondents' individual likes and dislikes. Therefore, it has been of interest to compare the responses within the same specialization to find out if there would be any differences in responses.

Chart 3. Frequencies of Positive Responses of Law & Management students (1st columns – 1st group, 2nd columns – 2nd group) versus the statements of the Questionnaire.
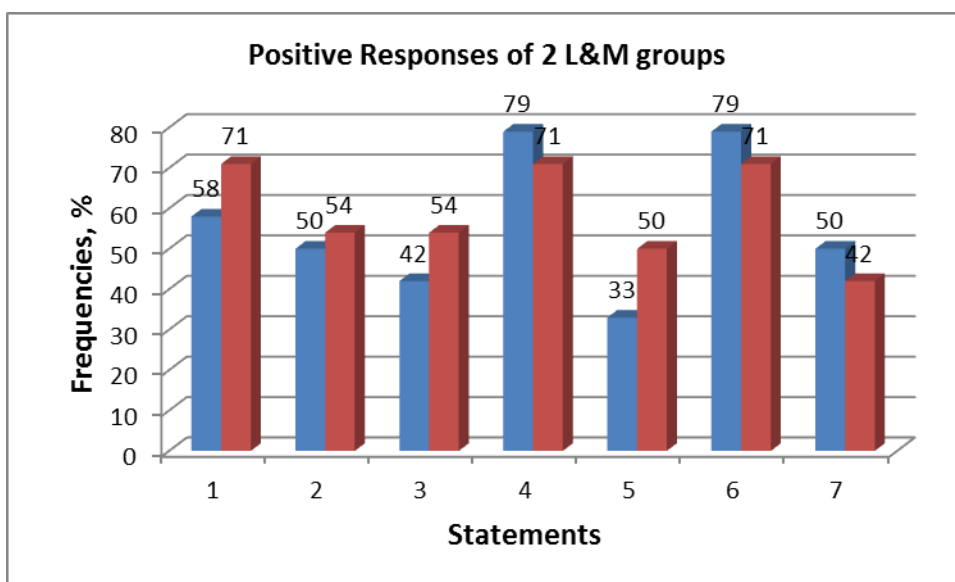

Chart 3 shows the frequencies of responses in two groups of students who study Law & Management. In fact, the differences in the frequencies of the students' responses between these two groups of the same specialization are more pronounced than between two samples in **Chart 1** or **Chart 2**. Moreover, it can be seen that the responses of the group 1 (1st columns) are less positive than the responses of the group 2 (2nd columns) for statements 1, 2, 3, and 5, and vice versa for statements 4, 6 and 7. Such scattering of the responses within the same specialization implies that our assumption that students' responses depend more on their

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individual approach to online activities and personal perceptions than on the specialization has been confirmed.

However, statistically it is essential to analyze the Means and the Standard Deviations of the responses because such an analysis can shed light on the significance of findings. Having computed these parameters for both samples, it has been found that the averaged values of the Means for Law specialization vary from the minimum 2.85 to maximum 3.63, and the Standard Deviations (SDs) – from 0.73 to 1.35. The Means for Law & Management specialization vary from 3.17 to 3.87 with the SDs from 0.88 to 1.19. The range of change in the Means is the highest for Law: the difference amounts to 0.78 with SD dispersal of 0.63, while for Law & Management it is slightly smaller, just 0.70 with SD dispersal of 0.31. This digital reasoning, however, does not answer the question how significant the results are. Therefore, a more detailed statistical processing should be conducted.

First of all, internal consistency reliability has been estimated by computing Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The value of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient must be at least .70 or higher, which is considered acceptable in most Social Science research situations (Bachman & Kunnan, 2005). In our case, the number of respondents $N = 75$ and there are 2 variables, i.e. 2 samples of different specializations. The computed values of Cronbach's Alpha have been equal to .874 for the positive and .880 for the negative responses. Therefore, according to the theory, the obtained results are reliable. The normality of responses has been checked by computing Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests for all samples. In all cases, data distributions have been found normal, which means that computation of Pearson's correlation coefficients *rho* is appropriate seeking to determine if there are any relationships between the students' responses. Computed Pearson's correlation coefficients *rho* are shown in **Table** for both samples of respondents.

Table Pearson's rho and the level of significance *Sig. p* (positive responses).

Respondents	Law students Positive responses	L&M students Positive responses	Law students Negative responses	L&M students Negative responses
Pearson's *rho*	.313	.313	.962(**)	.962(**)
Sig. p (2-tailed)	.608	.608	.009	.009

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

According to the data in Table, there is no linear relationship between the positive responses of two samples Law vs. L & M – columns 2 and 3. The value of *rho* .313 shows that there is no correlation between the data. For a good correlation *rho* must be close to 1.00. The value of *Sig. p* is .608, which is rather large, and it means that probability of the relationship is about 40%, which is not acceptable in Social Sciences. However, there is a correlation for negative responses – columns 3 and 4. Pearson's coefficient *rho* is equal to .962 which is close to 1, and the significance level *Sig. p* is equal to .009, i.e. the probability is 99%. It means that the findings for negative responses might be extended beyond the studied sample in spite of the limited number of respondents in this study.

Summing up the statistical analysis of the responses for 2 samples of respondents, it should be emphasized that learners of different specializations share similar opinions on e-learning, but statistically the linear relationship has only been found for the negative responses.

Conclusions

This research has identified students' perceptions of usefulness of online learning at a tertiary level. In general, respondents of two different specializations are either positive or negative towards various aspects of e-learning and to some extent their perceptions depend on specialization. Statistical processing of learner responses has shown that the values of Cronbach's Alpha for each specialization vary from .874 to .880, which means that the obtained results are reliable. The scattering of the responses within the same specialization points out that students' responses depend on their individual approach to online activities and personal perceptions and not necessary on the specialization.

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The computation of correlation relationships between the samples has demonstrated that there is a linear relationship between the respondents' negative responses on e-learning at the significance level of 0.01, i.e. the probability is 99%. It means that the obtained data are not accidental and could be extended beyond the studied samples of respondents.

Since online learning has become mandatory in higher education, its application in English for Specific Purposes is highly recommended.

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Appendix Questionnaire on Students' Attitudes to Learning Online

Statement 1
Learning time is flexible: you can do it at any time that is convenient to you.
    1) completely disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) completely agree
Statement 2
Your family or friends might get involved in your learning and help you.
    1) completely disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) completely agree
Statement 3
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
Statement 4
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
Statement 5
Online learning is useful for promoting lifelong learning skills.
    1) completely disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) completely agree
Statement 6
Your success depends on your self-discipline – doing things on time.
    1) completely disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) completely agree
Statement 7
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