

FOREIGN TRADE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' OPINIONS ON COMPUTER USE IN ENGLISH LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This article focused on students' opinions on computer use in English learning (EL). We hope that this survey could wake the awareness of the students who have not recognized computer importance, step-by-step raising their interest in computer application in their EL and at the same time, encouraging the students who have mastered computer roles to deploy them more effectively.

Keywords: computer, computer use, English learning (EL).

TÓM TẮT

Thái độ của sinh viên trong việc sử dụng máy tính hỗ trợ cho việc học tiếng Anh

Bài viết này tập trung vào việc đánh giá thái độ của sinh viên về việc sử dụng máy tính trong việc học tiếng Anh, qua đó giúp sinh viên nhận thức được tầm quan trọng của việc học tiếng Anh với sự hỗ trợ của máy tính, đồng thời giúp cho những sinh viên đã nắm vững vai trò của máy tính có thể triển khai ứng dụng này một cách hiệu quả hơn.

Từ khóa: máy tính, việc sử dụng máy tính, học tiếng Anh.

1. Introduction

Since a high-school student, we have been interested in the benefits computers bring to EL, such as saving much time in looking up vocabulary and finding information, providing a variety of exercises with immediate feedback, as well as interesting games to help to improve English and so on. Now, when we are lecturers of English at FTU, with high awareness of those benefits, we also expect all our students to apply ICT (Information and communication technology) to their learning. This encouraged us to conduct this survey in the hope of gaining an understanding of students' views on computer use in EL, which will serve as a foundation for our solutions to enable the students who have not been aware of computer roles to understand their benefits and apply them.

Many linguists emphasize the importance of computers in language learning [1, p.145; 2, p.486; 3, p.108; 4, p.145; 5, p.364; 6, p.55]. According to them, computers provide a useful means of finding information and generate learning motivation. Actually, with "multimedia features, combining sounds, images, text, and their ability

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to allow interaction between the medium and the learner” [7, p.405], computers are likely to attract learners in EL. In addition, they can give a helpful assistance in autonomous learning, that is, ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ [7, p.405]. And interestingly, with a computer, “learner can learn individually at her or his own pace” [6,p.55]. We strongly advocate those advantages as we ourselves recognized them during our self-learning using computers. It is thanks to those benefits, computer-assisted EL is becoming more and more popular in Vietnam. That inspired us to conduct this research into our students’ views on computer use in English learning. Therefore, this paper will focus on our students’ opinions on computer use in EL. Now that English is the most popular foreign language in Vietnam, we will use, in this paper, a specific term, that is, English learning, not the general one foreign language learning.

In the following part of this paper, we will present, in the first step, the theoretical background, what linguists think of computer use in foreign language learning in general. Next, in the second step, we will describe the methodology for the survey. The findings of this survey, in which we will present the student groups with different salient views will be the third step, followed by our discussion on those results, and lastly, the paper will end with our conclusion from these survey findings.

2. Theoretical background

Computers help individuals, communities, societies, and nations store oceans of knowledge and materials. Hence, they are a vital supportive source in people’s lives. In this paper, the indispensable roles of computers will be explained in detail related to student’s learning. Since computers enable students to collect a variety of sources for their studies, including sample problems, lecture notes, glossaries, assignments, test results, and graphics, they are installed to be seen as the most important tool to improve student learning [8]. Enhanced learning that could be achieved when computers play an important role in delivering content and creating learning opportunities to help students make meaning and develop an understanding of English [8]. What is more, computers also serve as a tool or a support for communicating with others in English, which means they are in an active role rather than the passive role of recipient of information transmitted by a teacher, textbook, or broadcast. Students are actively making choices about how to generate, obtain, manipulate, or display information in their English learning.

With computer software and the Internet, students are able to get information from around the world in a few minutes. There are so many resources right in front of us when we are in front of a computer. The illustrations of these are word processing tools, which allow you to write a paper and fix mistakes later rather than rewriting the whole thing; or Power Point programs that let you make easy and clarified

presentations [8]. According to James, computer also help students “experience new and challenging things, and to connect students with new and different people, places, and things” [9]. This will put a basis on students’ access to new programs all round the world for their broader and higher education. All in all, it cannot be denied numerous benefits that computers bring about to students’ learning.

3. Methodology

a. Context

With the acceptance of the Training Board of our university, on Monday afternoon after two first weeks of a new school year, the survey was carried out at the commencement of the class when students were fresh. Therefore they gave the correct information to themselves with careful thinking and passionate enthusiasm. As for the strategy for survey sample, we chose “simple random” [10, p.142], in which a class of 40 third year students with the upper-intermediate English level of International Business Relations department at FTU was chosen. These students had more or less experience in the computer use in EL, as they had already spent two academic years in which they had to give English presentations during each term, the information of which was gathered from softwares or Internet, using computers as a tool for their performance. The total number of participants for the survey was 32, including 03 males and 29 females, and 8 students left were absent or late.

b. Data collection, management and analysis

The instrument was questionnaires (40 copies), actually with 32 distributed. The questionnaire was constructed with a systematic structure, including the questions that gave a first basic insight into students’ opinions on computer use in EL and questions that asserted the consistency and the logic of students’ answers. Furthermore, there was a close relationship between the questions in each part (for example, the time for B.2 and B.6 could never be more than that for B.1. In case it was, the answers would be considered illogical.) and an integral part to decide the rightness of students’ responses. There were questions especially designed to gain a further understanding of what students actually thought about the computer use in EL (Appendix 1). Before students began giving the answers, we had emphasized the purpose of the survey and what the survey concerns was the computer use in English learning, avoiding the case students thought of the computer use in general purposes. The participants were expected to circle the options that were true to them. To questions requesting additional information, students were to accurately reflect what they wanted to say, which Nunan [10, p.143] clearly asserts the advantage of open questions of such kind in a questionnaire.

The response data was then entered into Excel worksheets. Then came the next stages, including database statistics, database relationship setting, comparison and

categorization of student groups with different salient opinions (see Appendix 2). Lastly, a relationship between different parts was established in order to draw out some tendencies among the groups.

4. Results

With the initial purpose of the survey, based on the database (see Appendix 2), we categorized the students' opinions into two groups:

Opinion \ Group	A	B
Support computer use in EL	28/32 participants	
No support for computer use in EL		4/32 participants

(see C.1 in Appendix 2). Actually, on closer examination regarding the answers to the questions B.2, B.3, B.4, B.5, B.6, B.7 and C.4, we could **confidently (too much)** assert the appropriateness of that classification. Most of the options expressing the regular use of and positive attitude towards computers in EL were circled by group A while those of the lower levels were chosen by group B. Take a critical look at the following examples:

* About software use time

	B.2: software use time (hours/week)			
	B.2.a (less than 2)	B.2.b (2-4)	B.2.c (4-6)	B.2.d (more than 6)
Group A	57%	18%	25%	0%
Group B	100%	0%	0%	0%

* About Internet use time

	B.6: Internet use time (hours/week)			
	B.6.a (less than 2)	B.6.b (2-4)	B.6.c (4-6)	B.6.d (more than 6)
Group A	36%	21%	36%	7%
Group B	50%	50%	0%	0%

* About the necessity of computers in EL

	C.4: without computers in EL	
	C.4.a (more difficult)	C.4.b (normal)
Group A	89%	11%
Group B	0%	100%

One identical and outstanding characteristic between the two groups was that the students of the two groups all concentrated in the three purposes such as looking up vocabulary, finding information, and preparing for next lessons. However, while group A achieved every purpose listed on the questionnaire, group B just accomplished some of them (see B.8 in Appendix 2).

* About the purposes students achieved using computers

B.8: purposes students achieved using computers		
	Group A	Group B
B.8.a (look up new words)	89%	100%
B.8.b (do grammar exercises)	11%	0%
B.8.c (practise listening)	71%	75%
B.8.d (practise speaking)	11%	25%
B.8.e (practise reading)	50%	50%
B.8.f (practise writing)	21%	0%
B.8.g (prepare for next lessons)	36%	25%
B.8.h (prepare for presentation)	86%	100%
B.8.i (voice chat to foreigners on the Internet)	11%	0%
B.8.j (find information)	89%	100%

Notice: Each item was calculated as follows:

Group A: the number of participants choosing that item / 28

Group B: the number of participants choosing that item / 4

In general, the results indicated the two contradicting opinions on the computer use in EL. However, both groups did use computers in their EL, even the group that did not support it.

5. Discussion

These findings correspond with Beauvois's (1998) and Jaeglin's (1998) conclusions in their reports, that is, 'students [...], with a few exceptions, are highly motivated when using computers' [3, p.109]. They also prove linguists' assertion that computers are of high importance, providing useful means of gaining information [1, p.145; 2, p.486; 3, p.108; 4, p.145; 5, p.364; Ruschoff, 1997 and Gewehr, 1998, quoted in 6, p.55].

Additionally, the survey results confirm that students use computers in an orientation of autonomous learning and improving their knowledge by surfing the Internet. This is to say that in the future, when not at university, students are able to

autonomously study without going to class by using computers. That is a joyful signal in the student learning autonomy.

However, the survey results also disclosed some limitations. As mentioned above, there were students who used computers in EL, but did not support it. This, according to them, was caused by the following reasons. The first was the high cost in accessing the Internet, and health effect, especially eye tiredness, which we ourselves used to feel the same. In our view, there should be support from the university in this aspect. That means the number of computers at the library or the language laboratory should be increased so that more students can access the Internet. Moreover, a long-term expectation is that second-hand CRT screens will be replaced by LCD, which decreases eye soreness effectively. Second, some students reflected that they could not use computers satisfactorily, not to mention proficiently. What they could do with computers just derived from their imitation. So, it is a must, we think, that there should be computer training classes to help students to be more confident in exploiting them to the full. Last, students complained that there was richness in the information on the Internet, and it was because of this that they lost their directions in choosing the suitable addresses. We opine that this is a good reason for the fact that teachers should be always necessary in students' learning. This is proved by many linguists. To Hanson-Smith, "[t]he more widely the internet access expands, the more important the teachers' role of guiding students to the suitable resources becomes" [3, p.112]. As for Jones, he emphasizes the inevitable role of the teachers even though under the immense resources of information relied on computers [3, p.361]. And to Celce-Murcia, "[c]omputer gives assistance to learning and teaching. In all means, it cannot replace the teacher" [2, p.486].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not redundant to emphasize again the survey purpose, that is, students' opinions on computer use in English learning. The results showed that 28 out of the 32 participants were highly aware of the necessity of computers to their English learning, and 4 were vaguely aware of it. There were, by no means, rational reasons for their thinking. Despite the unresolved limitations, the survey reached its initial success because a group of students surrounded us and asked for the addresses of the good web pages as well as some reliable softwares to learn English. This, hopefully, woke students' awareness on the computer use in EL and created a tendency of using learning-assisted tools, especially computers for the purpose of the autonomous learning orientation.

¹ C.1, B.1, B.2, B.3,: C.1 means question 1 in part C; B.1 means question 1 in part B in the questionnaire and so on. Similarly, B.1.a means option a in question 1 in part B and the list goes on.

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APPENDIX 1

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Would you please give the accurate information in order to help us collect data with the aim of offering solutions for improving English learning with the computer-assistance. Thank you for your thoughts and your help!

A. SOME PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Circle a letter a, b, c that is true to you:

1. Sex:	a. male	b. female	
2. Have a personal computer:	a. yes	b. no	
3. Computer use ability:	a. proficient	b. satisfactory	c. incompetent
Other opinions:			

B. THE COMPUTER USE IN ENGLISH LEARNING:

Circle a letter a, b, c, d that is true to you:

1. How long **per week** do you spend learning English **autonomously** (with and/or without computer use)?

- a. less than 3 hours
- b. 3 – 6 hours
- c. 6 – 9 hours
- d. more than 9 hours

2. How long **per week** do you spend using softwares to learn English?

- a. less than 2 hours
- b. 2 – 4 hours
- c. 4 – 6 hours
- d. more than 6 hours

3. How many coursebook/material disks (CD/VCD/DVD) are you using to learn English?

- a. less than 2
- b. 2 – 4
- c. 4 – 6
- d. more than 6

4. How many Vietnamese softwares are you using to learn English (English study, Lac Viet mtd, ...)?

- a. less than 2
- b. 2 – 4
- c. 4 – 6
- d. more than 6

5. How many foreign softwares are you using to learn English (Oxford, Encarta, LANGMaster...)?

- a. less than 2
- b. 2 – 4
- c. 4 – 6
- d. more than 6

6. How long **per week** do you spend using Internet to learn English?

- a. less than 2 hours
- b. 2 – 4 hours
- c. 4 – 6 hours
- d. more than 6 hours

7. How many web pages do you often access to learn English?

- a. less than 2
- b. 2 – 4
- c. 4 – 6
- d. more than 6

Circle the letters a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j that are true to you:

8. What among the following purposes do you develop in English learning using computers (softwares/Internet)?

- a. look up new words
- b. do grammar exercises
- c. practise listening
- d. practise speaking
- e. practice reading
- f. practise writing
- g. prepare for next lessons
- h. prepare for presentation
- i. voice chat to foreigners on the Internet
- j. find information

Other opinions:

C. YOUR OPINIONS ON COMPUTER USE IN ENGLISH LEARNING

Circle a letter a, b that is true to you:

1. Do you prefer using computers to learn English to not using them?

- a. yes
- b. no

Circle the letters a, b, c, d that is true to you:

2. What difficulties do you have in English learning using softwares?

- a. be costly
- b. not meet all your needs
- c. be unbelievable
- d. not be able to exploit

Other opinions:

3. What difficulties do you have in English learning using Internet?

- a. be costly
- b. not have Internet access
- c. not have the addresses
- d. not be able to exploit

Other opinions:

4. What would you feel if you **did not** have any softwares or Internet to use for English learning?

- a. more difficult than when I have them
- b. normal, my learning would be as good and easy as that when I have them

Other opinions:

Circle the letters a, b, c, d, e, f, g that are true to you:

5. When using a computer, which of the following items can you develop **better** than that when not using it?

a. vocabulary

Explain your choice:

b. grammar

Explain your choice:

c. pronunciation

Explain your choice:

d. listening

Explain your choice:

e. speaking

Explain your choice:

f. reading

Explain your choice:

g. writing

Explain your choice:

6. What are your general comments on computer use in English learning?

Good points:

Bad points:

The end

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