DISPENSING THE MYTH: CAN TECHNOLOGY INFLUENCE NEGATIVELY MOTIVATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES BY MEDICAL BACHELORS

Mariya Saykova
Medical College at Medical University - Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Mariya.Saykova@mu-plovdiv.bg

Abstract:. The current COVID – 19 pandemic has had a tight grip on Bulgarian society, students and teachers alike for nearly a year and a half, pressing the latter into a complete makeover of chosen methods and approaches in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Physical attendance was superseded by distance and online learning via Internet platforms such as Moodle, Google Classroom, Teams etc. For students of ESP at the Medical College of the Medical University in Plovdiv, the academic 2020/2021 was completely carried out in distance learning mode. This mode has been given a lot of attention in public, engendering a heated debate on its merits, but scholarly approaches on the issue are yet to gain solid ground. There has appeared though a plethora of research on the various aspects of ESP online learning methodology, but certain more trivial matters relating to some at first glance merely technical points have been neglected as being marginally relative. However, motivation for learning is a very complex case, demanding a multiaspectual perspective. Thus, this article sets itself a novel task in gauging students' motivation in distance learning mode by analyzing the relation between technical problems reported by students during online classroom activities and motivation in the course of study. The paper makes use of a manual tracking method recording all technical problems reported by the students learning ESP in their second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. It also correlates these results with the students' active participation in the classroom activities to measure motivation. The study incorporates all students in their first year at college, taking into account that the average level of foreign language fluency of the first-year students at the Medical College at the Medical University of Plovdiv is A2/B1 measured by a diagnostic test at the start of the first semester. The results of the tracking of reported technical problems and active participation in the classroom activities show, that generally speaking, more motivated students in terms of active work in the classroom come across fewer technical glitches. These outcomes are not immutable but vary through the course of work. There emerged three major types of students – the first type were very active and had next to none problems with their devices and internet connection. The second group had some technical problems at baseline, but gradually smoothed them out and toward the middle and especially the end of the semester were on a reasonable level in terms of participation. The third group, which luckily was not the most numerous one kept reporting technical issues relating to various reasons – faulty devices, poor Internet connection, etc. These students had obviously lacked the motivation to learn in distance mode, as attested by their poor attendance in the online classroom and hence insufficient participation. Although limited in scope the research does show that as a whole motivation does not depend on technical means to a great extent but comes prior to them. Although it is a common fact now that students still prefer and are more at ease with physically attending classes, their switching to a different mode of learning does not change their motivation level.
Keywords: online learning, COVID-19, medical bachelors, technical problems, motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic swooped over Bulgaria at the start of 2020 and immediately forced the entire educational system into a complete makeover of chosen methods and approaches pushing to the fore distance and online learning. Teaching English for Specific Purposes was no exception and thus physical attendance at university establishments was superseded by online platforms such as Moodle, Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams. A year and a half since then it is time for some analyses and conclusions regarding the viability and success of the latter methods. For students of ESP at the Medical College of the Medical University in Plovdiv, the academic 2020/2021 was completely carried out in distance learning mode, so some preliminary research findings are coming out in view of various examinations as to the students' motivation and ease of work. The investigations start from adopting some prior suppositions and theoretical approaches with regard to teaching English for academic purposes (EAP) and teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Both fields of educational analysis apply a plethora of methods and approaches including Internet based ones, aiming at achieving high levels of acquisition of language skills (Kern, 1995, Welch & Napoleon, 2015, Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, Dagnev,2019). The use of technologies and the Internet in particular present new ways of searching for motivation growth (Armstrong &Yetter-Vassot, 1994, Joshi & Kaur, 2011, Dagnev et al, 2017). Blended learning has also arisen as a new and significant educational development – a merger of traditional face-to-face instruction with computer-assisted instruction (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, Akbarov et al, 2018, Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019).

All these theoretical approaches delving into technology and the benefits it endows education with have been tested in the current COVID-19 situation. Research has been quick to emerge on the matter of coronavirus – related provision of educational services. Thus, Fatima (2020) writes about the challenges and opportunities of ELT in times of the pandemic, Ashmara (Ashmara, 2020) studies WhatsApp as a means of communication and educational tool, Novawan (Novawan et al, 2021) investigate students' experiences of online English language learning by using YouTube, Lori and Lawrence (Lori and Lawrence, 2020) explore foreign language teachers' cognition about online teaching in times of COVID-19, Kohnke and Jarvis (Kohnke &Jarvis, 2021) and Kohnke and Zou (Kohnke and Zou, 2021) explore teachers' success at delivering through online platforms, Dagnev (Dagnev, 2021) studies the attitudes of medical students towards online learning, to name but a few. Motivation has been at the core of researchers' interest, as the rapidly emerging new situation put forward basic questions about the success of long-awaited and discussed educational matters. One aspect of this debate has been neglected though – viz., how students' motivation is evidenced through the newly-sprung technological methods. One way, quite typical for the Bulgarian educational setting and perhaps customary for other countries with similar conditions (the ones in Eastern Europe, for instance), is the sustainability of the technical means in the online environment. It has become common knowledge, not restrained to the tertiary education, that students lacking in motivation for studying often report technical problems, hindering their participation in classwork. As this was the case also at the Medical College at the Medical University in Plovdiv, we decided to research into the matter. Thus the current paper aims to discover if there is an existing correlation between students participation, as a sign of motivation and technical problems reported by students during the online learning process in the time of COVID-19.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample material comprises of seventy eight students in their first year at the Medical College at the Medical University in Plovdiv, in six groups in different specialties, all of whom studying English for Specific Purposes. The specialties included Radiographers, Physiotherapists, Assistant Pharmacists, Medical Laboratory Technicians, Dental Technicians and Public Health Inspectors. The students were almost evenly distributed in the groups. The specified period of investigation was the second semester of the school year 2020/2021, i.e. the spring semester of 2021. The period consisted of 15 weeks of study with 13 of them constituting effective study – the first and the last week were dedicated to tests. The students' level assessed at base (the first week of the winter semester) was A2/B1 according to the European Language Framework. The number of the students' actual attendances was measured, excluding absences due to illness or other reason, but absences due to technical problems were accounted for in the research. Attendances were measured on each individual occurrence, or in other words, every time a student attended class was counted as a single attendance. All students were required to have their microphones at the ready and their cameras turned on during classwork. Participation was gauged on the basis of volunteering. Up to two self-induced turns accounted for active participation, while volunteering three times or more than three times in a session was considered a very active participation. Points were ascribed for each type of participation – zero points for lack of volunteering, two points for active volunteering and three points for very active volunteering. In this way, three groups of students were designated – inactive ones with average score less than 1 point per classwork session (Inactive Group – IG), active ones with average score more than 1 point per classwork session(Active Group – AG) and very active ones with average score more than 2 points per classwork session (Very Active Group – VAG). Technical problems were also measured with regard to every group. As far as they were concerned, all glitches were accounted for – temporary logouts, instances of faulty microphones or cameras, sound interferences etc. All logs were recorded manually at each classwork session.

3. RESULTS

Table 1. Ratio between attendances and participation points in all three groups.

Group	Number of students	Attendances		Absences due to tech. problems	Participation points	Average points of student per session
		Hypothetical	Actual			
Inactive Group (IG)	23	299	219	8	234	0,98
Active Group (AG)	38	494	482	4	778	1,61
Very Active Group (VAG)	17	221	214	4	635	3,06
Total	78	1014	915	16	1647	1,8

Table 1 presents the results reflecting the ratio between attendances and participation. As it can be seen the majority of students showed high motivation with almost half of the students being in the active group (AG). Out of 1014 possible attendances of all students in this thirteen-week period nearly 80 % of all absences were made by the Inactive Group (IG). Of these only eight of the absences were reported as due to technical glitches. As far as participation is concerned, the Very Active Group (VAG) far outnumbers the other two groups in terms of points. Its results are double the results of the AG and more than triple the results of IG. Correlated to the number of technical issues, VAG students attended classes the most, despite minor glitches.

Table 2. Occurrences of technical problems and ratio of these occurrences versus the number of attendances

Group	Occurrences of technical problems	Ratio of number of occurrences vs number of attendances
Inactive Group (IG)	143	0,65
Active Group (AG)	85	0,18
Very Active Group (VAG)	25	0,12
Total	253	0,28

Table 2 shows the number of technical problems encountered during the semester per designated group. As it can be seen, more than half of all reported glitches "belonged" to the IG. Against the backdrop of only 219 attendance during the semester, it means that this group (IG) ran into problems more than half of the times. As for the other two groups AG and VAG, the ration means that an issue occurred almost every sixth session per attendance of the Active Group and every eighth time of the Very Active Group.

Table 3. Times of reported technical problems during the semester.

Group	Occurrences reported during the first four weeks	Occurrences reported between the fifth and the ninth weeks	Occurrences reported between the ninth and the thirteenth weeks	Total
Inactive Group (IG)	46	39	58	143
Active Group (AG)	48	21	16	85
Very Active Group (VAG)	12	9	4	25

Table 3 shows that technical problems persisted in the IG throughout the semester, while they were smoothed gradually out (without eradicated them completely) by the participants in the other two groups. The number of technical issues was most frequent in the IG towards the end of the semester, when most revision is done.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The results from the research unequivocally corroborate the idea that there is a clear relationship between participation and encountered technical problems. It seems at first glance that the correlation between technical problems and participation is inversely proportional. That is to say, students who attended regularly with very few absences tended to have fewer technical problems. It is reasonable to suppose that for true motivation for learning, technology cannot pose any difficulty both in terms of technological skills or with regard to faulty devices or software.

Overall, we can roughly divide the students into two types as regards their motivation for learning. One type are those who run into technical problems all the time, obviously lacking in high motivation, which is confirmed by their poor results in volunteering for active participation. The mere fact that they had technical problems even more than every other time makes their involvement in the learning process problematic. It is easy to say that they profaned the reported technical issue and made excuses out of them. The data is suggestive of such conclusions, without being conclusive. Still, such observations, although well-grounded in common sense and even supported to a great extent by the findings, should be attested by more solid scientific studies. The other type were the students from both AG and VAG, who had very little technical issues and were fully committed to the learning process. It is difficult to state where the boundary between AG and VAG lies, as various factors should be taken into account, for instance, success rate, overall motivation, psychological state, character predisposition etc., which in our opinion is the subject matter of another research.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The presented research has its limits. Its main task is to identify a relationship between reported technical issues and motivation for study. In this respect it has fulfilled its goal, although it does not attempt to delve into the intricacies of the relationship between technical matters and motivation. Some illumination into the matter has been provided. We can decisively say though, that technology in itself or any problems thereof cannot be a reason for negative motivation as most students from the Active Group and the Very Active Group have proven. These students also encountered technical problems, but took them in their stride and eventually put them under control. As a broad corollary, it becomes apparent that technology issues can become another means of misuse when lack of motivation is manifested.

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