

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ICT USE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

There has been a large volume of published studies describing the attitudes of teachers and students towards ICT usage to study English; nevertheless, limited research has been conducted to examine the use of ICT in terms of frequency of use, purposes, perceptions, and expectations among EFL students. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to address this research problem. The research used a convenience sample of 149 English major students who were invited to respond to the questionnaire survey. The findings indicated that the participants spent more time using ICT for private purposes than for English learning purposes. Most of them showed their positive attitudes towards ICT use to study English and expected that ICT should be used more frequently in the classroom in order to maximize language learning and teaching. Gaining an understanding of the way the learners employ ICT for their non-educational purposes may help “shed light on how best to determine their educational uses” (Fujimoto, 2012, p.165). Pedagogical implications were also given in this current inquiry.

1. Introduction

The fast-growing advance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has made potential contributions to English language education for the past few decades. As a matter of fact, the use of technologies provides learners with unprecedented opportunities to practice English and involve themselves in authentic environments of language use (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002). For instance, they can use Skype Chat for interaction (Dalton, 2011), or social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter for writing practice (Cheng, 2012). In addition,

the integration of ICTs boosts learners' motivation because of multimedia capabilities including visual aids, audios, and videos (Altimer, 2011).

Since the benefits that ICTs bring to English language learners are, for example, motivation enhancement (Schoepp & Erogul, 2001), learner independence (Frith, 2005), and acquisition of skills (Galavis, 1998), they have been adopted by a large number of educational institutions in many countries in the world (Buabeng-Andoh, 2012). Within the Vietnamese context, on account of seeing that ICTs are of utmost importance, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (2008) put great emphasis on the reform of education through the implementation of ICT applications at any level of education.

In spite of the fact that much attention has been paid to the investment of technology in classrooms by universities in Vietnam, adequate concern is not given to students' ICT use as well as their perceptions of using ICT to study English. Moreover, gaining a deep understanding of the way the learners experience and perceive ICT use may help "shed light on how best to determine their educational uses" (Fujimoto, 2012, p.165) Therefore, this current study aims to fill this gap by conducting an exploratory inquiry into the use of ICT in English language learning among Vietnamese EFL university students. The specific objectives are raised as follows:

1. To explore the frequency and general and educational purposes of ICT use among EFL students
2. To examine students' perceptions and expectations of ICT use in English language learning.

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency of ICT use for non-learning purposes among English major students? For what non-learning purposes do students use ICT?
2. What is the frequency of ICT use for English language learning purposes among English major students? For what English learning purposes do students use ICT?
3. How do students perceive ICT use in English language learning?
4. What are students' expectations of ICT use in language learning?

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition

The term 'ICT' is defined as "forms of technology used for creating, displaying, storing, manipulating, and exchanging information" (Meleisea, 2007, cited in Nguyen, Williams &

Nguyen, 2012, p.3). This definition seems to be general; thus, within the scope of the current study, ICT specifically refers to computer-based technologies such as desktops, laptops, tablets, smartphones, and software and internet-based technologies including email, websites, and social networking sites for the purpose of English teaching and learning (Davies & Hewer, 2009).

2.2. ICT use in education and English language learning and teaching

There are a variety of ICT applications in English learning. Collis and Moonen (2001) categorized the applications of ICT into three groups, namely “learning resources” including educational software, online resources, and video resources, “instructional organization of learning” referring to software and technology tools for lecturing in the classroom, the course management system like *Moodle*, and the computer-based testing system like *HotPotatoes*, and “communication” consisting of email systems, and websites offering communication options.

The New Medium Consortium (2005a) mentioned the technological areas that potentially contribute to the field of education as follows. The first one is called Extended Learning, in which traditional teaching and learning is enhanced through new communication tools or social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, blogs, wikis, and instant messaging. In other words, the process of teaching and learning is not confined to the classroom setting any longer, it is enhanced beyond the classroom via these social networking sites where learners can engage in a communicative platform that “facilitate collaborative discussion, exchange of opinions, and critical thinking” (Cheng, 2012, p.2). The second area is called Ubiquitous Wireless, which deals with the “the rapid penetration of wireless networks” (Jung, 2006, p.29), fostering students’ flexibility in learning via the use of their portable or mobile devices including laptops, tablets, smartphones, and so on. Intelligent Searching, which is the third area, enables learners to search, organize and retrieve data in a more effective way. The fourth category is Educational Gaming, made up of games and simulations, is deemed as a learning tool to have beneficial effects on motivation, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving skills (Jung, 2006).

2.3. Benefits of ICT applications in English language learning

A considerable amount of literature has highlighted the benefits of ICT in language learning. Darasawang and Reinders (2010) stated that an online language support system helps promote

learner autonomy. Another contributing factor of ICTs is motivation. The blossoming of multimedia technology including visual aids, sounds, video clips, animations, and so on motivates learners, “attracts their attention and elevates their interest in learning” (Kuo, 2009, p.25).

What is more, the Internet connection allows learners to gain access to a huge amount of authentic materials to make English learning more enjoyable (Dang, 2011). Hence, the application of the online resources available to the inside and outside classroom activities can result in the enhancement of their competences in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, according to Kelsen (2009, p.3), “*YouTube* has the potential to connect learners with authentic English input through what is quite possibly already a part of their life experience ...and provides a context through which they can interact, exchange ideas, share feelings, and participate in a web-based environment”

2.4. Previous studies on students’ ICT use and their attitudes

Jung (2006) conducted an inquiry into 591 Chinese university students’ frequency of ICT use for general and English learning purposes and their perceptions of ICT applications in English learning. The findings indicated that most of them spent three to ten hours a week making use of ICTs including computers, PDAs, electronic music devices, camcorders, digital cameras excluding cell phones for general activities with 95% browsing the Internet for pleasure, 93.3% downloading music and videos, 83.4% checking and composing emails, 74.8% instant messaging, and 60.1% playing computer games whereas nearly 40% of them spent below one hour per week on ICTs to learn English. As regards their perceptions, the participants strongly agreed or agreed over the benefits of ICTs to the improvement of listening (75.9%), speaking (46.2%), and vocabulary (40%), but strongly disagreed or agreed over the positive effect of technology on improving their reading (31.5%), writing (32.8%), and grammar skills (41.7%). Caruso, Kvavik & Morgan (2004) undertook a study of 4,374 American students on their ICT use and their perceived benefits of ICTs to learning gains. The findings revealed that the learners spent a lot of time on communication and entertainment activities, and then study such checking emails (99.5%), surfing the Internet for pleasure (97.2%), and classroom activities (96.4%). As for the preference for ICTs in classrooms, the results indicated that the students preferred to use ICTs moderately in the classroom. On the other hand, when asked about the beneficial effects of ICTs on learning, only 12.7% of the students stated that ICTs improved their learning process.

Also in China, Liu's (2009, p.102) study which investigated Chinese non-English major students' attitudes towards ICTs as a medium for learning English and factors that gave rise to such attitudes consisting of the affective, cognitive and behavioral components showed that the participants recognized the advantages of ICT to learning English and "perceived ICT attributes" entailing "the advantage, compatibility, simplicity, and observability", "cultural perceptions of ICTs" involving "cultural or social norms of a country to technology acceptance among its people", "computer experience" and "ICT confidence" were the factors leading to differences in their ICT attitudes.

Kubiatko (2010) also carried out an investigation into ICT-related attitudes among university science education students in the Czech Republic. Unlike the aforementioned studies, however, this study assessed learner attitudes in terms of three variables, namely gender, grade, and residence. When it came to the results, male university, second-year, and town students were more positive in their attitudes towards ICT use as opposed to other groups. In Kullberg's (2011) study on Swedish teachers' and students' perspectives of the use of ICT in the English classroom setting, the students showed a more positive attitude to ICT than the teachers, and they would like to adopt computers more in the classroom. Finally, Kopinska (2013) analyzed Spanish EFL learners' attitudes to the use of technology after the implementation of an experimental project of ICT in the classroom setting. The findings indicated that the students were fully aware of the usefulness of ICT to their English language learning, but they also said that they had little exposure to new technologies for the learning process.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study used a convenience sample of 149 English major students (129 female students and 20 male students) from five classes at Hoa Sen University. All of the subjects were the second-year students who were taking the courses of Advanced Business English, Phonetics and Phonology, Academic Writing, and Reading and Grammar 2. The questionnaires were administered to the students during the break time with the assistance of the teachers who were in charge of these classes.

3.2. Instrumentation

The primary instrument that was used to collect data in this current study was the questionnaire. The four-section questionnaire was designed with a total of 46 items in the close-ended format. The first section elicited background information. The second section, which was based on Jung (2006), entailed hours spent and general purposes of ICT use with eight options. The third section dealt with hours spent on using ICT to learn English with eight options. The final section consisted of the items in the close-ended format on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree) to investigate students' perceptions and expectations of the use of ICT in English language learning.

Before the questionnaire instrument was officially used in the study, piloting was conducted by providing it to 30 participants who were not included in the main study. The aim of piloting was to enable the researcher to “identify problems, so that they could modify, delete, and add items in the instrument to increase its reliability” (Wang, 2009, p.103). To ensure the participants' complete comprehension of the instrument, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and also used in the pilot and main study.

3.3. Data analysis

The participants' responses were processed with SPSS version 20 to perform descriptive statistics in which frequencies and percentages were computed and analyzed in order to answer the research questions 1, 2, 3, and 4.

4. Findings

4.1. Frequency of ICT use for non-learning purposes

When it comes to the question of the frequency of ICT usage for non-educational purposes in a week, more than half of the participants (55%) claimed that they spent more than twenty hours as illustrated in Table 1. Nearly 30% reported that they spent from six to fifteen hours a week with 12.8% between six and ten hours and 16.8% between eleven and fifteen hours respectively. It is also worth noting that all of the subjects spent time using ICT for general purposes per week.

Table 1. Weekly hours of ICT use for non-learning purposes

Weekly Hours on General ICT Use	Response Rate	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Do not use	0	0%
Below 1 hour	0	0%
1-2 hours	5	3.4%
3-5 hours	4	2.7%
6-10 hours	19	12.8%
11-15 hours	25	16.8%
16-20 hours	14	9.4%

4.2. General ICT activities

The survey consisted of the question asking about which non-learning purposes the learners used ICT for. Table 2 shows that the four most frequent activities that the learners got involved in were checking and composing emails (98.7%), checking *Facebook* (97.9%), reading news on the Internet (95.9%), and using chat applications with friends (92%), followed by downloading or listening to online music, and watching *YouTube* with the same percentage rate (88%). More than two-thirds of the participants used the *Google* map, played games on mobile phones, and did the online shopping. Playing computer games was also one of the participants' frequent activities (58.4%). In contrast, the three least frequent activities of ICT entailed checking the weather forecast (36.4%), checking a bank account (24.8%), and making websites (8.8%).

Table 2. ICT use for non-learning purposes

Activity	Response Rate	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Checking and composing emails	148	98.7%
Checking <i>Facebook</i>	147	97.9%
Reading news on the internet	143	95.9%
Using chat applications with friends	137	92%
Downloading or listening to online music	131	88%
Watching <i>YouTube</i>	131	88%
Using <i>Google</i> map	117	70.5%
Playing games on mobile phones	101	67.9%
Shopping on the internet	100	67.1%
Playing computer games	87	58.4%

Checking the weather forecast	54	36.4%
Checking a bank account	37	24.8%
Making websites	13	8.8%

4.3. Frequency of ICT use for English language learning purposes

The second research question asked about how many hours the students spent using technology to study English, and the results revealed that 66.4% of them spent fewer than ten hours a week using ICT to learn English. It is surprising to notice that only 33.5% of them reported that they spent more than ten hours on ICT usage for English whereas the majority (88.4%) spent more than ten hours per week using technology for general non-educational purposes as clearly illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Weekly hours of ICT use for English language learning

Weekly Hours on ICT Use for English Learning	Response Rate	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Do not use	2	1.3%
Below 1 hour	7	4.7%
1-2 hours	13	8.7%
3-5 hours	36	24.2%
6-10 hours	41	27.5%
11-15 hours	26	17.4%
16-20 hours	10	6.7%

4.4. ICT activities for English language learning

For the English language learning purposes, what stands out from Table 4 is that the most frequent usage was for using online dictionaries (97.3%), and listening practice (96.1%), followed by searching for English materials on the Internet (90.5%) and using *Google* translation (89.2%). The majority of the participants used ICT to practice their language skills including speaking with 83.9%, writing with 81.9%, and reading with 73.3%. In addition, an interesting finding was that employing web-based flashcards to study new words was one of the activities that more than half of the learners got engaged in. On the contrary, they spent less time using emails to discuss assignments with their friends (46.3%), teachers (44.8%) and joining a forum to share English learning experience (43%).

Table 4. ICT use for English language learning purposes

Activity	Response Rate	
	Frequency	Percentage
Using online dictionaries	145	97.3%
Listening practice	143	96.1%
Searching for online English materials	135	90.5%
Using <i>Google</i> translation	133	89.2%
Speaking practice	125	83.9%
Writing practice	122	81.9%
Reading practice	110	73.3%
Using web-based flashcards to learn vocabulary	74	56.5%
Discussing assignments with friends via emails	69	46.3%
Discussing assignments with teachers via emails	67	44.8%
Sharing English learning in a forum	64	43,00%

4.5. Learners' perceptions of ICT use in English language learning

Generally, as can be seen from Table 5, the vast majority of the students (82.6%) perceived that ICT usage had a positive effect on English language learning. To be more specific, 66.4% of them agreed that the use of ICT improved their reading ability. In addition, although more than half of them showed their agreement on the benefits of ICT to writing and speaking skills, 41.6% and 32.2% of them were skeptical about the improvement of these two skills via the use of ICT. When answering the question of enhancing their ability in listening, however, 85.2% of the students showed their agreement, making it by far the highest agreed skill out of the four skills. With the mastery of grammar and vocabulary acquisition, the students expressed strong positive responses to the usefulness of ICT with 67.1% for the former and 85.9% for the latter respectively. Also, most of them reported that using technology brought more fun to English learning, thus it brought motivation to them (80.6%). A large number of the students concurred that the use of ICT let them gain access to more updated English materials (80.6%) and was a good method for teachers and students to communicate (87.2%). It is also worth noting that the students' disagreement concerning the benefits of ICT use was not found.

Table 5. Learners' perceptions of ICT use in English language learning

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The use of ICT helps me study English more	1.3%	1.3%	14.8%	47.7%	34.9%

effectively.					
2. The use of ICT helps me improve my reading skills.	4.0%	4.0%	25.5%	53.0%	13.4%
3. The use of ICT helps me improve my writing skills.	2.0%	4.7%	41.6%	42.3%	9.4%
4. The use of ICT helps me improve my speaking skills.	6.7%	7.4%	32.2%	34.4%	18.8%
5. The use of ICT helps me improve my listening skills.	1.3%	1.3%	12.1%	38.9%	46.3%
6. The use of ICT helps me master my grammar competence.	0.7%	5.4%	26.8%	49.7%	17.4%
7. The use of ICT enables me to acquire vocabulary better.	0.7%	1.3%	12.1%	49.0%	36.9%
8. English learning can be more fun with ICT applications.	1.3%	2.0%	16.1%	38.3%	42.3%
9. The use of ICT (e.g. the Internet) lets me gain access to more updated English materials.	2.0%	2.7%	14.8%	42.3%	38.3%
10. The use of ICT is a good way for instructors and students to communicate.	1.3%	1.3%	10.1%	48.3%	38.9%

4.6. Learners' expectations of ICT use in English language learning

Table 6 indicates that most of the students expected that ICT is used more often for teaching and learning English because it helped them to improve their English skills (87.2%) and made learning more fun (85.9%). Furthermore, they would like English teachers to use updated online materials for teaching (83.9%). One interesting discovery was that 78.5% of them needed teachers to teach them how to search for and use online learning resources. What can be inferred from this finding is that students lacked knowledge of information literacy search skills, which has been mentioned in several research studies (Ilogho & Nkiko, 2014; Baldwin & Balatsoukas, 2010). When it comes to the question of joining an online forum to discuss English learning with friends, only 42.3% of them showed an interest whereas 38.9% of them were skeptical about it. A large number of them (85.2%) also hoped to use emails to communicate with their teachers for advice after class.

Table 6. Learners' expectations of ICT use in English language learning

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I hope ICT is used more frequently to help me improve my English language skills.	1.3%	0.7%	10.7%	51.0%	36.2%
2. I would like English teachers to use updated	0.7%	2.0%	13.4%	50.3%	33.6%

materials on the internet for teaching.					
3. I need English teachers to teach me how to search for and use online learning resources.	2.7%	4.0%	14.1%	45.6%	32.6%
4. I hope ICT is used more frequently to make English learning more fun.	2.7%	1.3%	10.1%	49.7%	36.2%
5. I hope to communicate with English teachers for advice via emails after class.	0.7%	0.7%	13.4%	60.4%	24.8%
6. I hope to join an online forum to discuss English learning with friends.	6.0%	12.8%	38.9%	32.2%	10.1%
7. I don't want English teachers to use many ICT applications to teaching.	22.1%	34.2%	23.5%	16.8%	3.4%
8. I would like to study English without ICT.	49.0%	32.2%	9.4%	7.4%	2.0%
9. I hope ICT will enable me to study English more efficiently.	2.0%	1.3%	5.4%	47.7%	43.6%

5. Discussion

The findings from the students' responses on the frequency of ICT use for general and English learning purposes in this study revealed that the students spent more hours per week using ICT for general purposes (communication and entertainment activities) than for English learning purposes. Specifically, 88.4% of them spent more than ten hours a week using technology for non-educational purposes while only 33.5% of them spent more than ten hours using technology for English learning purposes. Similar findings were also found in Jung's (2006) study showing that "the majority of the participants spent three to ten hours weekly using ICTs for general purposes whereas almost 40% of the participants less than one hour per week using ICTs for learning English". These results were also confirmed by the study of Melor, Maimun and Chua (2009), when they found that the general activities that the students spent more time on were communication (emailing, checking *Facebook*, chatting online), and entertainment (surfing the internet for pleasure, listening to online music, playing computer games) while they spent less time utilizing ICTs for the purposes of learning.

As regards the perceived benefits of ICTs in English learning, the majority of the students (82.6%) indicated positive attitudes. According to the data, it can be concluded that there was a perception among the participants that the use of ICTs in language education could improve listening, speaking, reading, writing skills, grammar, and vocabulary. This survey result was in agreement with the previous study by Melor et al. (2010), who also found students' highly positive attitudes towards language improvement through ICT use such as

English vocabulary enrichment (89.4%), grammar improvement (84.8%), writing skills (74.3%), speaking skills (89.4%). In addition, most of the learners perceived that ICT applications would make language learning more fun. This could be explained that multimedia technology including visual aids, sounds, video clips, animations, and so on motivates learners, “attracts their attention and elevates their interest in learning” (Kuo, 2009, p.25).

As far as the learners’ expectations of using ICT to study English are concerned, most of them hoped that ICT should be used more often for the teaching and learning process. What can be inferred from this finding is that the application of ICT to the classroom setting was quite limited. This limited access might be attributable to teachers’ preference for traditional teaching methods and their lack of knowledge in updated technology. Therefore, a small number of teachers employ ICT in their teaching and encourage their students or teach them how to do so (Dogoriti, 2010; Abdul Rahim, 2011). What is more, Dang (2011) made it clear that the limited use of ICT by the teachers was due to their fear of increasing workloads, which means that they would have to spend more time preparing the lesson and insufficient training in technology was also the factor leading to their unwillingness to employ ICT.

6. Conclusion

The findings in this research study highlighted that the majority of the students spent more time employing ICT for general purposes than for language learning purposes. Also, they showed strong positive attitudes towards the benefits of technology to English language learning and expected that ICTs should be used more frequently in English teaching and learning. These research results carry several pedagogical implications as follows:

1. First and foremost, the students in this study used technology for a greater variety of non-learning activities; thus, gaining a deep understanding of these activities “might shed light on how best to determine their educational uses” (Fujimoto, 2012, p.165).
2. Secondly, the learners expected teachers to instruct them how to search for and use learning resources on the Internet. This could be explained that the students lacked information literacy search skills (Ilogho & Nkiko, 2014; Baldwin & Balatsoukas, 2010). Henceforth, there should be information literacy search skills workshops on a regular basis aiming to give students detailed instructions on how to be in search of online resources to maximize their language learning.

3. Finally, despite the fact that the investment of technology such as computers, and Internet access on campus is available, many students do not seem to see the great potential of technology in language learning. Therefore, students should be provided with information technology knowledge through training workshops so that they utilize ICTs in learning English effectively.

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