The acceptance of a wiki site as a learning platform in English exam training: students' perceptions

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Abstract

The development of computer mediated technologies facilitated the paradigm shift in the culture of working and learning. Due to these changes, language education is also going through the development beyond the communicative approach to more complex and dynamic action-oriented approaches. There arises a necessity to explore how language teaching and learning, which are guided by new strategies, can be mediated through technology. This research proposes the deployment of a wiki site as a "learning platform" the design of which is underpinned by the principles of networked learning (NL). A wiki-site created by the teacher will be deployed as a platform for language learning and exam training. The study explores students' perceptions of accepting a wiki site as a learning platform for IELTS (International English language testing System). The previous research has pointed to the fact that wiki as an educational technology has not been used for improving IELTS training so far. So, before large-scale implementing of it on a regular basis at the formal university level, it is necessary to explore whether students accept or reject this information technology as an educational tool. Taking a pragmatic view of NL approach allows the authors to start with exploring the needs of learners involved in NL environments so that a teacher could co- construct the knowledge about the design together with the learners. Technology acceptance model was used to gather the data via an on-line survey. The participants are undergraduates from different faculties who voluntarily and anonymously took part in the research. The survey included the questions about the main TAM constructs: perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, attitudes, intentions and expectations. The research reports a high level of agreement on easiness and usefulness of wiki sites, with the latter sub-construct having a higher rate of agreement among the respondents. Overall, students are reported to have high expectations of a wiki technology used for practising exam skills. However, there is evidence of some less positive outlook in terms of students' prior experience of wiki in their studies. Despite some limitations, the paper reveals favorable students' perceptions and proposes implications for further wiki deployment.

Key words:

students' perceptions, TAM, a wiki site, English learning, networked collaborative e-learning, IELTS

Introduction

The development of computer mediated technologies facilitated the paradigm shift in the culture of communicating, working, and learning (Harasim 2000; Jones 2015). Due to these profound changes in the way how information is processed and disseminated, language education is also going through the development beyond the communicative approach to more complex and dynamic action-oriented approaches based on the ideas of mediation across cultures, worlds and media (Piccardo et al. 2019). There arises a necessity to explore how language teaching and learning, which are guided by new strategies, can be mediated through technology. This research proposes the deployment of a wiki site as a "learning platform" (Passey 2011) the design of which is underpinned by the principles of networked learning. The effectiveness of using wiki tools for learning languages as a second one (L2) is well documented in the literature (Li 2012). Wiki sites create learning communities where collaborative goal-oriented practices can take place (Henderson et al. 2015). There is the necessity to research how exactly a wiki site is perceived by learners as a possible educational platform in their exam training.

The research aim

In 2015, the conception of developing students' foreign communicative competence was adopted in the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE, Russia). According to the new strategy, the students of 1st and 2nd courses of all faculties are expected to pass an examination in IELTS format (International English Language Testing System) at the end of each course. The formal training is arranged using conventional face-to face weekly meetings (only two hours per week) and a learning management system (LMS). The system offers obvious advantages and benefits, but it is unwillingly accepted by teachers and learners (Liashenko 2017), so an "appealing approach" can be a "hybrid course site" that would be linked to the formal context but will be openly accessible (Godwin-Jones 2016 p 347). With an advent of social media there arises the necessity to switch to more shared and "dynamic learning platforms" to integrate traditional approaches with collaborative Web 2.0 media (Stern 2011). Wiki technology is viewed as a transition zone between the university with its formal approach and life-worlds of students (Bergold 2012). The choice of a wiki technology is in line with a networked learning (NL) perspective which "questions how new knowledge is developed, emphasizing collaboration and sharing as both a pedagogical and social goal" (Jones 2015, p. 25). In the proposed research learning is placed into a NL collaborative environment mediated via a wiki technology. The questions of better understanding thinking, and intentions of learners involved in NL activities are within NL scope (Goodyear et al. 2001). The previous research has pointed to the fact that wiki as an educational technology has not been used for improving IELTS training so far. So, before large-scale implementing of it on a regular basis at the formal university level, it is necessary to explore whether students accept or reject this information technology as an educational tool. Being an underpinning theory of the research, NL provides the rationale for exploring students' intentions and their interest in deployment of a wiki site for extra training in an informal context. The research question is whether the learners are ready and willing to access wiki as an educational and learning platform to construct new knowledge.

Theoretical framework underpinning the project design

NL is a theoretical framework to view the teaching practices based on social interaction and connections between the participants and the resources (Goodyear et al. 2001). The nature of learning happening in a social collaborative space such as a wiki site can be defined as a networked collaborative e-learning space which is based on well-articulated values and beliefs that underpin this study (McConnell 2006; Hodgson et al., 2012). Collaboration and dialogue in the learning process takes place in communities or groups, the central place of which is based on differences and connections formed by weak and strong ties. These implicit relationships are expressed in different modes of participation, changing role of students and teachers, mediating functions of the technology. Such type of learning involves a community which is intentionally designed as an educational space following the principles of knowledge building that is aimed at an intentional goal-oriented interaction between participants of the learning process (Bonamy & Haugluslaine-Charlier 1995; McConnell 2002). The pedagogical design of a wiki site is underpinned by key principles of networked collaborative e-learning (McConnell 2002). The strategy will involve numerous mediation activities (text, concepts, communication) embedded into the primary context of the curriculum and online interaction mediated with a wiki site.

Research site and context

The participants are 2nd year students in HSE from various faculties (Management, Economics, IT) who demonstrate a good command of the English language (intermediate and upper-intermediate levels). They are invited to join the community on a voluntarily basis. The rationale for joining and the potential learning benefits along with the design of the learning community will be explained in advance and one week will be given as a trial period to decide on joining or not. The research consists of several stages including the following steps: preparation, development, deployment, data collection and analysis. At the preparatory stage, the students were asked to answer closed questions via an online survey using SurveyMonkey tool (https://ru.surveymonkey.com/home/) to determine students' needs and expectations from the project. The rationale for conducting the survey is to make students' intentions and perceptions of using a wiki site as a learning platform be explicit (Kooper 2005). The paper describes the preparatory phase of the research which is prior to a wiki deployment

Data gathering

The purpose of this stage of the research was to collect quantitative information about the extent to which students accept a wiki site as an educational tool using the constructs of TAM: perceived ease of use (PEU), perceived usefulness (PU), attitudes and intention" (Davis et al 1989). TAM was applied because it "focuses more on the importance of a technology as a tool" (Passey, 2010, p. 7).

The data for this phase was collected from three groups of undergraduate students (number= 32) preparing for IELTS.. To determine students' perceptions about the acceptance of a wiki site for the exam preparation, the respondents were asked to answer 7 questions using Likert scale form "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The questions were

structured as TAM sub-constructs. The participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. A total of 32 responses were returned.

Question number	Statement	strongly disagree	moderately disagree	neutral	somewhat agree	strongly agree
3	wiki is easy to use	0.00%	3.13%	25%	53.13%	18.75%
4	Easy access to wiki	0.00%	12.50%	3.13%	50%	34.38%

Table 1. Perceived ease of use

Most respondents moderately or strongly agreed with the statements. There were no responses showing strong disagreement. Considering the percentages, the most agreed-upon response is the statement "wiki is easy to access". The construct PU was analyzed using the question related to studies in general/

Question number	Statement	strongly disagree	moderately disagree	neutral	somewhat agree	strongly agree
5	Using wiki is useful for studies	0.00%	6.25%	0.00%	37.50%	56.25%

Table 2. Perceived usefulness

Most respondents (number=27) agreed with statements about usefulness of wiki sites for studies in general. However, 6.25% of respondents disagreed moderately with acceptance of wikis for studies.

Table 3 illustrates the data about responses towards construct attitude (6) and intention (7) in TAM model

Question number	Statement	strongly disagree	moderately disagree	neutral	somewhat agree	strongly agree
6	It is a good idea to use wiki sites for exam preparation	0.00%	0.00%	3.13%	53.13%	43.75%
7	I am going to use this site for IELTS	0.00%	3.13%	6.25%	59.38%	31.25%

Table 3. Attitudes towards using wiki for English learning and intentions

The question about students' expectations regarding a wiki learning platform for IELTS training shows their needs and priorities which match the overall aim of the course, i.e. to improve or train skills and have more practice.

Findings

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (number=31) show a positive attitude towards the idea of wiki deployment for studying English, with 29 respondents expressing their readiness and high degree of intention to use it for IELTS preparation.

Findings of the data analysis illustrate that a wiki site as an educational tool proves to be easy to accept from students' perspectives. They do not expect any difficulties to access wiki sites. However, a minor percentage of the respondents disagreed with the idea of usefulness of the technology for studies. This statement can be categorized as the item for deeper research at the qualitative stage in future. As for usefulness of wiki for studying English in particular, the data present the highest percentage of agreement. Overall, students rated both constructs high, with large percentage of agreement about usefulness and ease to use, with the sub-construct PU being more influential in decision-making than PE. In other words, the students showed a higher rate of agreement concerning usefulness of the technology for studies (statement 5) in comparison with the ease of usage (statement 3), with 94% and 72% correspondingly. The attitude and intention to use the technology in future exam preparation is high with 91%of agreement among the respondents (statement 7). However, answering the question about the usage of wikis for studies 62.5 % of the respondents answered in the negative: 20 students out of 32 have never used this technology for studies. This percentage gives much food for thought before deployment of a wiki into a real teaching process. The findings correspond with the research in this field proving that deployment of wiki technology in higher education is an effective teaching strategy but it requires "design knowledge" and much scaffolding (Manzini 2006).

Conclusion

The use of a wiki site as an educational tool in exam preparation has not been widely researched yet. The study was aimed at exploring the acceptance of this technology among students with the idea of its future deployment into teaching English in the university context. The quantitative survey has helped collect and analyse the data on the main constructs of TAM. The results and the findings should be treated with some caution as the number of respondents and a limited number of questions do not provide a solid ground to generalize for larger population. Although there were certain limitations for this small-scale study, it has resulted in some interesting findings that can inform technology enhanced teaching in future exam preparatory courses. The research tried to fill in the gaps in the existing literature concerning the usage of wiki for IELTS training. It is reported to validate quantitatively a high level of agreement among students on usefulness and easiness of this technology for their English learning studies. The data revealed a high level of students' rating for PU and PE of the tool. As for theoretical contribution to NL theory, this research can be an attempt to inform NL design using a pragmatic approach via TAM model. This approach is associated with the idea of learning through experience which points to the problems that can be resolved by inquiry (Jones 2015). Such a pragmatic view of NL research allows to start with exploring the needs of learners involved in NL environments so that a tutor/ teacher/ course designer could co- construct the knowledge about the design together with the learners.

Overall, wiki sites should become a part of academic life and be implemented for different teaching and learning purposes. The small-scale project has been conducted to explore students' perceptions of wiki's acceptance as an educational tool. The findings highlight favourable perspectives for further deployment of a wiki technology into academic environment.

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