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THE POTENTIAL OF BLENDED ESOL COURSES: ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES AMONG THE UK IMMIGRANTS

Summary: A considerable number of immigrants in the United Kingdom confront challenges as they acculturate into a new way of life, where language competence significantly influences their social, economic and cultural integration. Such immigrants are often at an educational and social disadvantage compared to the majority of population due to their different social and cultural backgrounds, prior educational experience and the lack of language competencies. The use of technologies for teaching / learning the host country language has been emphasized in European Strategy 2020 policy. Although learning of English usually takes place very naturally in an English-speaking informal environment, formal educational institutions in the UK and immigrants' native countries tend to be very helpful as well. Assuming that such learners of English usually need more intensively-paced learning and knowing that professional commitments or other reasons can prevent them from coming to classes, blended learning can help them reach their goals faster and not lose connection with their native country. In order to develop insight into such English learners' needs as well as to identify teaching forms that could help in meeting these needs, this study used a survey to explore the most important factors influencing the development of the UK immigrants' English language competence and students' general practice of using ICT for English learning and their attitudes towards ICT in foreign language learning. Furthermore, the research aimed to answer the question whether a blended strategy of language learning organized by their native countries institutions would be able to positively influence the learning outcomes while maintaining a connection with their native country and culture. The research sample was a group of English learners enrolled in an ESOL course. To explore the needs, experiences and attitudes of the participants, a quantitative research methodology was applied and short semi-structured interviews were conducted. The present research has demonstrated that the advancement of technologies has increased the use of ICT not only for personal purposes but also for work and studies. The students have indicated quite a frequent use of various on-line English study tools and programmes and have demonstrated a generally positive attitude towards blended English learning.

Keywords: ESOL courses; the use of ICT in ESOL; blended English teaching; English learning attitudes and practices among migrants.

Introduction

Migration issues are of fast growing research interest all round the world. Education is one of primary vehicles helping adult and children immigrants integrate in a new country. Current research has shown that there is evidence

that immigrants are often at an educational disadvantage compared to the majority of population (Kilpi, 2010) due to their different social and cultural backgrounds, prior educational experience and the lack of language competencies. Despite of growing numbers of migrants and research on migration, empirical research addressing language competency development and its relation to the increase of self-esteem and better career opportunities for immigrants is lacking.

It has already been suggested that language competences may be an important factor influencing emotional and behavioural progression of a migrant. For example, Toppelberg and Collins' (2012) research on bilingual migrant children has shown that both languages (the language of a host country and a native language) are of equal importance as the former is "crucial for academic success and long-term social and economic well-being" in a new country and the latter helps "immigrants maintain a meaningful connection to their heritage culture and language" (Toppelberg & Collins, 2012). This bilingual competence may influence better social competence, literacy skills and academic achievement; on the other hand, Toppelberg and Collins (2012) claim that poor competences of a native / host language can be closely connected with learning disorders (low IQ and communicative, social and school competences) and internalizing disorders (anxiety and depression) (Toppelberg & Collins, 2012).

The use of technologies for learning the host country language relates three European Strategy 2020 policy areas at EU level: immigration and integration policy, information society policy and education policy (European Commission, 2015). Rapidly growing information and communication technologies offer opportunities for creating learner-centered environments which can be adapted to learners' particular needs and their educational backgrounds, enabling teacher / learner interaction without the constraints of time and place. Blended language learning could be extremely beneficial for migrant learners because different interactive tools can be attractive for young emigrant learners and peers in their native country, flexible and thus very suitable for working adult emigrant learners, who usually do not have a possibility for intensive face-to-face classes. Last but not least, blended learning organized at emigrants' native countries education institutions enables learners to use a learner's native language as the language of instruction. Ozkan (2015), who has investigated language learners'

perceptions of using wikis and blogs, states that such interactive tools increase the opportunities for collaboration and interaction, which, in case of migrant language learners, could become a means of building a bridge between a host and native country. Such forms of collaboration and cooperation have long been recognized as the ingredients of effective pedagogy (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). Furthermore, Kern (2013) describes his successful experience with blended learning for taxi drivers: podcasts, developing the language skills taxi drivers need for their work, provided an opportunity for mobile learning, organizing the material into manageable chunks and authentic social context. Although available research has focused on blended language learning and its great impact on the change of language teaching in general, empirical research has not yet fully examined the potential of blended ESOL courses for immigrants.

The majority of immigrants in the United Kingdom confront challenges as they acculturate into a new way of life, where language competence greatly influences their social, economic and cultural integration. The needs of and provisions for immigrants to learn English include those learners who have recently arrived or have been living in the UK for a rather long time, but still do not speak English. Although learning of English usually takes place very naturally in an English-speaking informal environment, formal educational institutions in the UK and immigrants' native countries tend to be very helpful as well.

Most adult education institutions are increasingly looking for ways to incorporate on-line resources into their teaching. Assuming that learners who need to progress quickly opt for more intensively-paced learning and knowing that professional commitments or other reasons can prevent them from coming to class, blended learning has become more attractive among the adult learners who are surrounded by technology in their everyday lives.

Methodology

The study aims at exploring the perceptions and needs of 18 students of ESOL courses in Boston in regard to blended learning of English. Addressing the following research questions in the present paper, it also overviews the potential of virtual mobility at Vytautas Magnus University, which is successfully making its way to blended language teaching:

1. What are the most important factors influencing the development of ESOL students' English language competence?

2. What is ESOL students' general practice of using ICT for English learning and their attitudes towards ICT in foreign language learning?

3. Could a blended strategy of language learning organized by their native countries institutions improve their learning outcomes while maintaining a connection with their native country and culture?

Furthermore, the researchers also aimed to:

• identify the participants' educational and linguistic background;

• explore the opportunities to practice and use the English language in a host country;

• evaluate the learners' experience in general practice of ICT and the use of on-line English study tools;

• find out the students' attitudes toward the implementation of ICT in teaching English;

• explore the main obstacles to learning English with the help of ICT;

• establish new understanding of the use of ICT as a tool to teach and create a link between an emigrant and his / her native country.

To explore the needs, experiences and attitudes of 18 participants, a quantitative research methodology was applied. The first section of the questionnaire was composed of 5 close-ended and 3 open-ended questions and was designed to gather data about the participants' educational and linguistic background, the opportunities to practice and use the English language in a host country and their experience in general practice of ICT and the use of on-line English study tools and programmes. The second section of the questionnaire focused on the participants' expectations related to a possible implementation of ICT in the English language learning and teaching process as well as the main obstacles to learning English with the help of ICT. Permission was obtained from ESOL school authorities to distribute the questionnaire at the school. The questionnaires were administered in classroom settings during their normal elementary level ESOL classes. All aspects of the research procedure were conducted in English and, when needed, in the students' native language. One short semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant in order to encourage the students' reflection on their learning experience and their attitudes

towards ICT as a language study tool. Finally, an attempt was made to answer the question whether a blended strategy of language learning organized by the students' native countries institutions could create more possibilities for emigrant learners and help not lose connection with their native country.

Sample

The research sample was selected on the basis of three criteria. Firstly, all of the participants were at the elementary level (level A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) of English language competence. Secondly, the respondents shared similar cultural and social backgrounds, as well as socio-economic status. Thirdly, their experiences as newcomers to the United Kingdom were relatively fresh, as the time spent in a new country as immigrants was not more than three months. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants prior to the application.

The participants were 15 Lithuanian and 3 Latvian learners of English enrolled in an ESOL course and the research is written from the perspective of a teacher who works with and teaches this group of adults. The students had varying levels of education, with the majority at a tertiary or non-finished tertiary level. Some of the respondents came from bilingual families where they reported that several languages were spoken at home in the UK. English was the first foreign language of all the respondents, and their average age, which ranged from 29 to 62, was 38.4 years. To ensure the validity of the measurement, the researchers of the current paper turned to two experts in language teaching asking them to consider the content validity of the questionnaire. Finally, it is important to note that the data are not longitudinal in nature and the results are limited by the small sample size.

Results

The present study shows that ESOL students often face diverse challenges while learning English, have contrasting attitudes towards ICT and offer divergent set of

competences, perceptions, learning experience and expectations to foreign language learning as individuals.
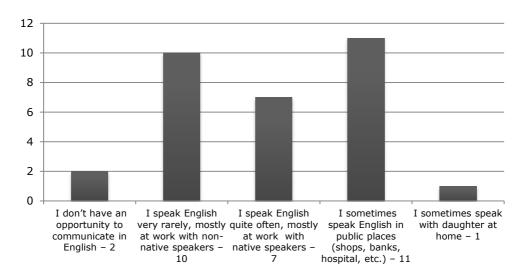

Fig. 1. **Opportunities for students to communicate in English**

Figure 1 demonstrates the opportunities for ESOL students to communicate in English. 11 respondents stated they sometimes speak English in public places, 10 speak English very rarely, mostly at work with non-native speakers at work, 2 learners of English do not have an opportunity to speak English at all and one respondent sometimes speaks English with his / her daughter at home. As an interview with the participants of the study research has revealed, although some of the respondents are well educated people in their native country (6 tertiary, 5 non-finished tertiary and 5 vocational), in England they work non-qualified jobs in factories mainly because of their limited English language skills. Most of them work with non-native colleagues who speak Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian at work. Only a few of the interviewees reported that they have an opportunity to communicate in English with native speakers. The lack of opportunities to communicate in English reduces chances to find a better job and integrate into the local society.

The study showed that although living in an English-speaking environment, the participants of the study have very few opportunities to practice their English skills as they live and work in a rather closed circle of immigrants

and native English speakers are usually unwilling to communicate with non-native English speakers. Such lack of interaction negatively influences the immigrants' social, cultural and emotional acculturation in their host country. Finally, this can result in learners' low self-esteem and failure to make progress in English and their life in emigration in general.
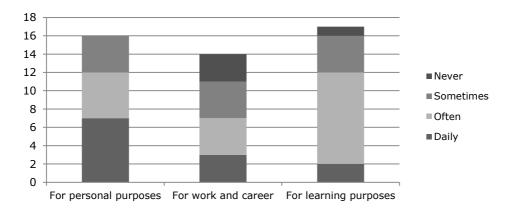

Fig. 2. **General practice of ICT among students**

It seems that on-line English courses and ICT implementation into ESOL courses might help such students improve the language skills more effectively. Therefore, opportunities for blended or distant learning as well as obstacles to the successful implementation of it should be considered. Figure 2 illustrates the general practice, frequency and purposes of the students' use of technologies. According to the questionnaire results, 7 respondents acknowledged that they use information and communication technologies for personal purposes daily, 5 learners of English use them often and 4 sometimes. 3 participants of the present survey use ICT for work and career daily, 4 interviewees use information and communication technologies often, 4 sometimes and 2 never. Two thirds of the respondents use ICT for learning purposes daily (2) or often (10), four respondents use it sometimes and just one interviewee mentioned he/she never uses ICT for learning purposes. Figure 4 demonstrates that the advancement of technologies has boosted the use of ICT not only for personal purposes but it has become often used for work and studies.

Gravells (2012, p. 80) states that ICT can encompass a wide variety of activities, such as 'audio and video clips, calculators, computer programs, digital cameras, camcorders and video recorders, e-assessments, electronic brain games, electronic templates, e-mail, e-portfolios, interactive and on-line programs, mobile and smart phones, on-line discussions, presentation packages, scanners, social networking, video conferencing,…' . In addition, technology can help overcome barriers to learning; for example, pairing an experienced student with an inexperienced one, adjusting students' needs to absorb different learning at different time scales, letting learners benefit from varied listening and learning skills and those who require flexible teaching approaches (Bijeikiene at al, 2009). Reece and Walker (2007, p. 138) listed a number of ICT benefits that can respond to individuals' learning requirements: access to material at a student's own pace, materials available prior to the session, an easy adaptation of electronic materials (e.g. font size), an availability of the contact between a teacher and a student via e-mail, discussion forums, etc.
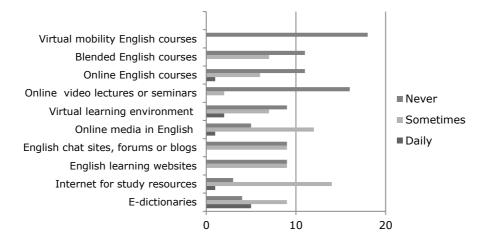

Fig. 3. **Students' use of on-line English study tools and programmes**

The study aimed to investigate which on-line English study tools and programmes are most popular among the research sample. As Figure 3 demonstrates, e-dictionaries are used daily (5) or sometimes (9) by majority of the respondents. Internet for study resources and on-line English media seems to be quite attractive for students. English learning websites, chat forums and blogs are also

sometimes used by half of the respondents. Virtual study environment is sometimes used by 7 study participants, blended English courses are favoured by 7 respondents and on-line English courses by 6 English learners. Just one student stated to use daily Internet for study resources, 1 for on-line English media and 2 learners daily use virtual learning environment as the language study tool. Few students are aware of English on-line lectures and seminars and no one is accustomed with the use of virtual mobility English courses. Taking the above mentioned responses into account, one should pay attention to different learning preferences which can significantly affect learning. Reece and Walker (2017, p. 139) suggest that such differences can be grouped into categories of a similar nature, for example 'experience, knowledge and skill'; however, the variety of individual differences should also be accommodated or 'blended' into teaching. It seems that ICT can very easily integrate these individual varieties into language teaching and have a positive effect on learners' higher study outcomes.
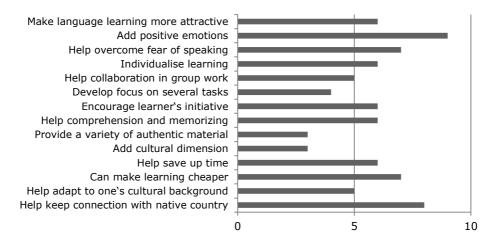

Fig. 4. **Students' attitudes towards ICT in foreign language learning**

The second part of the research aimed to analyse the participants' attitudes towards the implementation of ICT in learning English. Figure 4 shows that most ESOL students generally find the use of technologies in learning the English language attractive (see Figures 4–6), and agree that ICT can add positive emotions, encourage students' independence and initiative. In addition, the majority of learners mentioned that communication technologies can help them adapt their language learning to their educational and cultural background (5),

overcome the fear of speaking (7), make comprehension and memorizing easier (6), develop focus on several simultaneous tasks (4), provide a variety of authentic teaching material (3) and add cultural dimension to language learning (3). Furthermore, 7 respondents stated that blended courses can make learning cheaper and help save up time as not all students have an opportunity to commute to English courses on daily basis (6). Half of the students stated that ICT can help them keep the connection with their native country if learning is organized by an institution in their native country. The researchers have come to a conclusion that virtual English learning environment could be extremely helpful for emigrants whose foreign language competence is very basic and who would appreciate an English teacher's explanations in their native language. Finally, it could be a cost-effective resolution that would improve learning outcomes, students' motivation, and classroom dynamics.

The study also revealed that 35 percent of the respondents would prefer to study English as a second language in a blended mode, 50 percent would like to study in the classroom and 15 percent would be interested in learning in the distant way. The research shows that half of the respondents would prefer ICT integrated learning to classroom learning. In order to meet the educational and psychological needs of such learners of English, it is essential to help them develop social, cognitive, ICT, time management and motivational skills, which are mentioned in Figure 5 as main obstacles to raising their competence in English with the help of ICT:
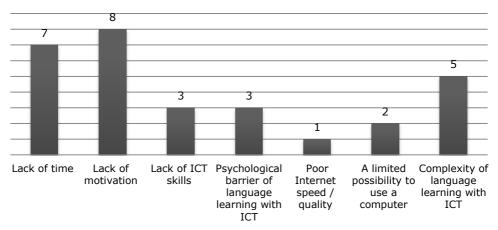

Fig. 5. **Major obstacles to raising English language competence with the help of ICT**

As Figure 5 illustrates, most ESOL students state that the barrier for English language learning is the lack of time and motivation. 3 respondents are concerned about their ICT skills; 3 learners of English think that   a psychological barrier of language learning with ICT and the complexity of language learning with technologies can be a main obstacle for implementing ICT into language teaching. Nevertheless, Scrivener's (2011) idea that virtual learning environments are 'simple organizational platforms', where one can easily find useful resources and keep in contact with their peers and teachers, probably confirms a well-known truth that things that seem complicated can be astoundingly simple when you try them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In sum, the analysis in the present article provides some support for the idea that language competency development can become the means of increasing the self-esteem and social well-being of a newcomer integrating in a new country and could be a guarantee of better career opportunities. The current research shows that ESOL students can face diverse challenges while learning English, have contrasting attitudes towards ICT and offer divergent set of competences, perceptions, learning experience and expectations to foreign language learning as individuals. It is worth emphasizing that taking these individual differences into account is of primary importance.

The study showed that although living in an English-speaking environment, the participants of the study have very few opportunities to practice their English skills as they live and work in a rather closed circle of immigrants and native English speakers are usually unwilling to communicate with non-native English speakers. This can further result in learners' low self-esteem and failure to make progress in English and their life in emigration in general. Furthermore, it has been investigated that major obstacles to learning English are the lack of time, financial difficulties, older age and psychological barriers to learning in older age in general.

The present research has demonstrated that the advancement of technologies has affected the use of ICT not only for personal purposes but also

for work and studies. The participants of the present research have indicated quite a frequent use of various on-line English study tools and programmes, such as e-dictionaries, English learning websites, chat forums, blogs and other. They also have demonstrated a generally positive attitude towards blended English learning, which, according to the respondents, can add positive emotions, encourage students' independence and initiative, help them adapt their language learning to their educational and cultural background, etc. Moreover, the respondents tend to agree that ICT can help them keep the connection with their native country if language learning is organized by an institution in their native country, be a cost-effective and time-saving solution.

However, special attention should be paid to those immigrant adult learners who are not confident using ICT equipment and may need further training. On the other hand, most adult learners have other important responsibilities and commitments to their families, such as creating a safe home environment, coping with emotional stress and culture shock in a foreign country. Having these factors in mind, it is very important to ensure that learning environment is suitable for all students, identify learning needs and implement solutions, use suitable teaching methods and design good interactive materials that can be used independently and effectively by ESOL students with different ICT and language learning skills and abilities.

Finally, it is important to remind that the data are not longitudinal in nature and the results are limited by the small sample size. In further studies, the sample size could be expanded by including more language learners of different nationalities, cultural and social backgrounds. What is more, researchers could explore how language learning outcomes are related to students' language learning strategies, individual learning styles, emigration time and reasons, psychological and financial well-being and other variables, which may also be important correlates.

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MIŠRAUS ESOL MOKYMO GALIMYBĖS: DIDŽIOSIOS BRITANIJOS EMIGRANTŲ POŽIŪRIS IR PATIRTIS

Santrauka. Bandydami integruotis į naują visuomenę daugybė Didžiosios Britanijos imigrantų pradžioje susiduria su įvairiais iššūkiais. Svarbu pabrėžti, kad kalbinė kompetencija turi didelės įtakos socialinei, ekonominei ir kultūrinei individo integracijai. Imigrantai, turintys skirtingas socialines ir kultūrines sampratas, mokymosi patirtį ir ypač žemą anglų kalbos kompetenciją, dažnai patiria edukacinę ir socialinę atskirtį. Strategija „Europa 2020" pabrėžia technologijų svarbą gyvenant ir mokantis kalbų ne gimtojoje šalyje. Nors esant anglakalbėje šalyje anglų kalbos mokymasis tampa natūraliu ir organišku procesu, vykstančiu neformalioje aplinkoje, formalaus mokymo institucijos Didžiojoje Britanijoje ir imigrantų gimtosiose šalyse taip pat gali būti labai naudingos. Turint omenyje, kad minėtieji besimokantys anglų kalbos dažniausiai pageidauja intensyvesnio mokymo, taip pat dėl profesinių įsipareigojimų ar kitų priežasčių nevisada turintys galimybę lankyti mokymus, mišrus anglų kalbos mokymas(is) galėtų padėti sparčiau pasiekti mokymosi tikslus ir neprarasti ryšio su gimtąja šalimi. Siekiant nustatyti tokių besimokančiųjų poreikius ir pasiūlyti tinkamiausias mokymo(si) formas, atitinkančias šiuos poreikius, buvo atliktas tyrimas, kurio tikslas buvo ištirti svarbiausius veiksnius, įtakojančius Didžiosios Britanijos imigrantų anglų kalbos kompetencijos tobulinimą, išsiaiškinti besimokančiųjų patirtį ir požiūrį į technologijų naudojimą mokantis anglų kalbos. Be to, tyrimo autorės siekė išsiaiškinti, ar nuotolinis kalbos mokymas, organizuotas imigranto gimtojoje šalyje, galėtų sąlygoti aukštesnius mokymosi rezultatus ir padėti palaikyti kalbinį ir kultūrinį ryšį sujo tėvyne. Tiriamųjų grupę sudarė studentai, besimokantys anglų kalbos ESOL kursuose. Tyrime taikyta anketinė apklausa ir pusiau struktūruoti interviu, kuriais buvo siekiama ištirti respondentų anglų kalbos mokymosi poreikius, patirtį ir požiūrį į nuotolinį anglų kalbos mokymąsi. Tyrimas parodė, kad technologijų pažanga įtakoja jų naudojimą ne tik asmeniniams tikslams, bet ir darbui bei studijoms. Respondentai nurodė gana dažną įvairių internetinių anglų kalbos mokymosi įrankių ir programų naudojimą ir išreiškė teigiamą požiūrį į anglų kalbos mokymąsi mišriu / nuotoliniu būdu.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: ESOL kursai, technologijų naudojimas anglų kalbos mokymui(si), mišrus / nuotolinis anglų kalbos mokymas(is), migrantų anglų kalbos mokymosi patirtis.