

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNET RESOURCES ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of Internet resources on foreign language learners. The objectives of this study were to examine the factors behind foreign language learners' use of the Internet, their experiences using the Internet to learn, and the effects of using Internet resources on their learning methods. Qualitative research methods, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, and non-participatory observations, were used to collect data. The participants in this study were Taiwanese university students whose native language was not English. Content analysis of the collected data found that 1. foreign language learners agreed that the Internet made learning easier; 2. foreign language learners had trouble focusing due to the variety of functions and services provided by the Internet; 3. foreign language learners concentrated on websites unrelated to learning which lowered the learning effects; 4. self-control was the main factor determining effective use of the Internet in foreign language learning; 5. free online dictionaries were the resource most commonly used by foreign language learners; 6. while most foreign language learners relied on the Internet, some learners advocated the use of traditional paper learning methods. Lastly, the results are discussed and suggestions for foreign language learners, teachers, and future studies are proposed.

Keywords

Foreign language learning; Online learning, E-learning, Adult education

Introduction

In 1987, the US National Science Foundation set up seven supercomputing centers around the country using TCP/IP protocols for free use by academia and paid use by industries, laying the foundation for today's Internet. After the World Wide Web (WWW) diffused to all corners of the world in 1995, now the Internet can be used to access all sorts of information and even be used for shopping. The WWW made computer networks indispensable tools used to obtain data [1].

Online learning is a natural trend [2,3]; schools have used the low cost and convenience of networking information technology to establish online e-learning environments. Due to the ubiquity of the Internet, some students have become lost in the online world and play games, watch movies, and shop on their smartphones during class, creating a recent problem in classrooms. This study investigated the use of the Internet in foreign language learning to determine the effects from learners' perspectives. The results can serve as a reference for academia when developing e-learning mechanisms and suggestions to improve learning effectiveness are given to teachers and foreign language learners when using the Internet.

Based on the motivations above, the objectives of this study were as follows:

1. Investigate the factors behind foreign language learners' use of the Internet.
2. Investigate foreign language learners' experiences using the Internet to learn.
3. Investigate the influence of Internet resources on learning methods.

Literature Review

The literature on online learning and learning achievement is discussed below.

Online learning is a learning method that uses the Internet [4]. For learners, compared to traditional learning methods, online learning saves time and money, is not restricted by place, and allows learners to adjust their pace [5,6].

Many past studies have investigated the effects of online learning on learning achievement. For example: Liu [7] examined the effects of online cooperative learning on sixth grade students' rhetorical ability and found that overall, students in the online cooperative learning group had significantly better rhetorical ability than the students in the cooperative learning group. Yu and She [8] investigated the effects of online and offline problem solving teaching strategies on first grade students' biology learning effectiveness and found no significant difference in academic achievement.

Although most students currently rely on the Internet to search for information, Xu's [9] study on attitudes toward finding data found that more than half of students merely glance over information that they found; however, their academic performance increased if they read it in more detail. (p.49)

Aside from online learning, Bai [10] investigated the effects of online gaming addiction on university students' learning and lives and found that participants sacrificed many things in reality by spending time playing online games; thus, they were more apathetic towards people and events in real life and more concerned with spending time with online friends and advancing the game's storyline. Therefore, those participants' academic performances had declined.

Literature review illustrated that the Internet is a study tool; however, its misuse may cause academic performance to decline; for example, if learners lose self-control and concentrate on

other matters, such as games. As concentration is crucial to and correlated with learning and learning cannot take place without concentration, scholars have investigated the functions of concentration from many different angles [11-16]. The effects of concentration on academic performance has been a major issue of importance [17,18]. The connection between foreign language learning and concentration has also become the topic of study [19]. Yen, Hu, and Ke [20] investigated the effects of concentration on learning effectiveness for e-learners and found that the two were significantly and positively correlated. Similar to traditional learning methods, e-learning requires a great amount of concentration to improve learning effectiveness.

Research Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were ten students taking a required English language class at a university in Taiwan who were non-English majors and whose native language was Mandarin. All participants have not passed the English proficiency examination with a score equivalent to a paper-based TOEFL score of 457. Aside from all being foreign language learners, the participants were all able to utilize Internet resources.

Qualitative Research Design and Methods

This study used qualitative research methods. Qualitative research aims to investigate the nature of reality and various aspects of phenomena. In order to understand the correlation between foreign language learners and the use of Internet resources, this study used focus groups, in-depth interviews, and non-participatory observation to collect data. Content analysis, or protocol analysis, was then used to examine the data.

Focus group discussions. Three focus group discussions were held throughout the semester (coded A, B, and C). The participants were

invited to discuss the points on the focus group outline drafted before each session.

Individual interviews. In-depth interviews were held with each member of the focus groups where the investigator asked the participants (coded D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, and M) about their studies and points on the interview outline.

Classroom observations. The members of the focus groups were all students in a required English language class. The investigator observed the participants' classes and used these observations as evidence for the data collected.

Qualitative analytical methods. Semi-structured and open-ended questions were used during the interviews to gain an objective perspective on the participants' thoughts and feelings. The participants were allowed to describe their experiences using their own language in order to investigate their usage of the Internet in studies and in life and provide a broader outlook for the investigator to draw insights on the correlation between participants' Internet use and foreign language learning. The validity of this study mainly depended on the truthfulness of the participants' responses.

After the focus group discussions and individual interviews, transcripts were made and coded for content analysis. The sequence of qualitative analytical methods was reading the transcripts, classifying and coding the results, examining repeated codes and content, and making corrections and further classifications [21].

Research Findings and Discussion

Data analysis of the focus groups, individual interviews, and classroom observations found that foreign language learners are reliant on Internet resources, yet are aware that their learning efficiency does not improve.

Foreign Language Learners Recognize the Convenience of Online Learning

The current technological developments have diversified the methods available for learning; thus, many teachers have attempted to compare different teaching methods. As students are closer to new technologies, they can absorb knowledge more quickly and efficiently as most things can now be found on the Internet. (I)

Foreign Language Learners Have Trouble Focusing Due To the Variety of Functions and Services Provided By the Internet

As technology continues to advance, the number of methods for learning English also increases. The Internet serves as a massive knowledge base available for all learners. However, with the increased usage rate, learners become more distracted with other websites. The correct use of the Internet has become a major issue for modern society. (K)

Foreign Language Learners Concentrate on Websites Unrelated To Learning Which Lowers Learning Effects

After reading for a short while, learners may want to use their smartphones to look up a word, but become distracted with Facebook or messaging software and begin using their phones for entertainment. While it has become more convenient to look up information, learners are more reliant on these products. Technological advancements have increased the use of smartphones in learning, yet have decreased learning effects. This may greatly lower learning outcomes. (H)

Self-Control Is the Main Factor Determining the Effective Use of the Internet in Foreign Language Learning

Lifestyles today are characterized by the increased use of the Internet and constant multitasking; I think that causes problems with concentration. As the Internet has become more accessible, many people may become distracted

which may cause a decrease in learning effects. (F)

Free Online Dictionaries Are the Resource Most Commonly Used By Foreign Language Learners

The advantages of using the Internet include the large amount of resources, many of which are free. After searching for desired content, the "online lookup" function can be used to record new terms in order to quickly improve English language skills and intuition. (D)

While Most Foreign Language Learners Rely On the Internet, Some Advocate the Use of Traditional Paper Learning Methods

I think there are many creative methods to learn, but they are not efficient and may not suit me. Studying on the Internet actually is harmful to your eyes and no one can guarantee that you study; it is easy to become distracted. (G)

Future Research

The ten participants in this study did not excel at foreign language learning; thus, the results may only be applicable to low achievers in foreign language study and not to high achievers. Due to time constraints in this study, high achievers in foreign language study were not included; thus, comparisons between learners with different characteristics should be considered in future studies.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study interviewed learners and analyzed the effects of use of the Internet on their foreign language studies. The results of this study found that 1. foreign language learners agreed that the Internet made learning easier; 2. foreign language learners had trouble focusing due to the variety of functions and services provided by the Internet; 3. foreign language learners concentrated on websites unrelated to learning which lowered the learning effects; 4. self-control was the main factor determining

effective use of the Internet in foreign language learning; 5. free online dictionaries were the resource most commonly used by foreign language learners; 6. while most foreign language learners relied on the Internet, some learners advocated the use of traditional paper learning methods.

The following suggestions for effective foreign language study are provided based on the results of this study. 1. Foreign language learners should improve their self-control. 2. Foreign language learners should learn how to properly use Internet resources. 3. Schools should establish relevant counseling mechanisms. 4. Schools should provide courses on online education. 5. Schools should improve administrative support systems to combat the increase in learners addicted to online games, movies, advertisements, shopping, and social media. 6. Teachers should become familiar with online addictions. It is hoped that these suggestions can help foreign language learners receive adequate guidance to help improve their learning abilities and that this study can help improve the public's understanding of the correlation between Internet resources and foreign language learning.

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