Chapter 15
International Students' Learning of EAP and Affordances in Online Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

The increase in implementing online learning tools in learning environments has highlighted the importance of their integration into language learning, especially English for academic purposes (EAP). As EAP students are mostly international people in higher education (HE), HE institutions (HEI) have intended to leverage digital technology for better teaching and learning of EAP. Therefore, the present chapter has intended to look at international students' learning in the EAP Toolkit and blogging for EAP, and the improvement of self-directed online learning. Data from qualitative and quantitative research methods indicate that online learning can promote EAP students' learning as long as they are supported in a well-designed online learning environment in which features such as affordances and components of self-directed online learning are considered to embed.

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology for educational purposes has become so increasingly widespread that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) started advertising themselves, by claiming that they integrate technology into their teaching. Besides the goal to attract more students, especially international students, HEIs have, in fact, intended to leverage technology for better teaching and learning. Some HEIs have designed tools in their own labs or within their projects institutionally or globally, whereas some have benefited from 'big companies'' tools in their education program, such as Learning Management Systems (LMSs) and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) (Juhaňák, Zounek & Rohlíková, 2019). More than 85% of HEIs in Great Britain used VLEs in 2003 (Ferguson, 2012), while over 90% of American HEIs have invested in LMSs for nearly three decades (Macfadyen & Dawson, 2012).

Using technology has also affected English Language Teaching (ELT) in such a way that HEIs have attributed their achievement to the implementation of technology into their education policies. ELT does not cover just one specific context but comes about through its use in varied contexts as a means for self-development in a global environment (Murray, 2018). Above all, people need effective language skills to make themselves heard worldwide. For example, a scientist needs to write an article in a language which others can understand. Zakirova, Tsilenko and Tsilenko (2019) exemplify this need as well as requirement in a Russian context. They indicate that "Today English for academic purposes should be taught as the second, not as a foreign language at Russian universities" (p. 47), which enables researchers to share their interest and knowledge in a global context, in this case, within a research network. Therefore, enhancing English language learning, especially in foreign contexts, has been one of the core missions of HEIs to promote their students' career and learning in any department ranging from geography to linguistics, science or education.

Although the integration of digital technology has been investigated and emphasized by many scholars in different fields, there is still a need to understand its practice into education, as also stated by Sarker, Wu, Cao, Alam and Li (2019) in their systematic review. Therefore, the present research aims to explore the use of technology for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) amongst international students in a UK HEI. It poses three research questions in order to answer:

(1)   What do international students think of their learning in the EAP Toolkit?
(2)   What do international students think of blogging for their learning of EAP?
(3)   How can an online learning environment for EAP be improved for self-directed online learning?

BACKGROUND

Online Learning Environments

Researchers have indicated different definitions for online learning. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) and Wills, Leigh and Ip (2011) mention 'wholly' online, while Lowenthal, Wilson and Parrish (2009) talk about the medium, means and context in which technology is utilized. Most scholars (Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004; Conrad, 2002) define it as access to learning that takes place through the use of technology. Furthermore, Watson, Winograd and Kalmon (2004) see it as "education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily via the Internet" (p. 95). Taking into account those definitions, the present paper describes online learning as learning taking place through the medium of digital devices such as:

- "desktop and laptop computers
- software, including assistive software
- interactive whiteboards
- digital cameras
- mobile and wireless tools, including mobile phones
- electronic communication tools, including email, discussion boards, chat facilities and video conferencing
- Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)
- learning activity management systems" (JISC, 2004, p. 10)

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