Chapter 9
Student and Teacher Views on the Use of Online Language Support Tools in EFL Exam Preparation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the use of selected digital language support tools in a cross-level English course preparing students for various international standardised examinations. It hopes to offer a better understanding of how digital technologies can be incorporated into language classrooms and what learners and teachers need to know in order to benefit from their use. The study addresses two questions: How familiar are learners with various online tools and what do they use them for? What do learners and teachers think about the tools in the context of foreign language learning, especially for exam preparation? To investigate these issues quantitative and qualitative methods are applied. The findings confirm that regardless of their language proficiency level students should be familiarised with the tools available to them and made aware of the advantages and disadvantages of using them for learning purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Using digital tools to enhance the quality of one's writing especially in a foreign language is becoming increasingly common given a variety of support tools available on the market and relatively easy access to them in terms of financial or technology-related requirements. However, as accessible and popular as these tools are, they do not automatically lead to efficiency of use and generate expected immediate and long-term outcomes. Understanding how these emerging technologies are perceived in language classrooms, and what learners and teachers feel they need to know in order to benefit from their use, is a prerequisite for the successful integration of these technologies into classroom language teaching.

This chapter is based on a professional inquiry project which explored the use of selected digital tools to improve students' writing skills in a cross-level English course preparing students for various international standardized language tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, Pearson Test of English (PTE) and Cambridge examinations. The inquiry aimed to analyze students' familiarity with various digital tools and the purposes for which these tools are used, as well as students' and teachers' attitudes towards the application of these tools in foreign language learning and teaching, particularly for exam preparation. The project was guided by the following two research questions:

- 1: How familiar are students with selected digital language support tools and what do they use them for?
- 2: What are the views of students and teachers on using digital language support tools in language learning and assessment?

Conducted within a German university language center, the inquiry employed quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the above research questions. Data were collected from two consecutive cohorts of students (in the winter semesters of 2022/23 and 2023/24) and included results from two online surveys, analyses of student texts composed with and without the use of selected tools, and students' reflections on the use thereof, and recordings and transcripts of structured interviews. To examine teacher's views the data from a teacher's diary were analyzed.

The tools in focus included a spell checker, an automated machine translation tool, an automated writing correction and feedback tool and a generative artificial intelligence tool. For the purpose of the project, a spellchecker is understood as a software feature embedded in a word processor such as Microsoft Word or Office Libre which recognizes incorrectly spelt words and often also basic grammatical mistakes and automatically corrects them or suggests possible corrections. Automated machine translators (MT) are online applications based on artificial neural

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