The use of MS Teams in ESP instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic: students' attitudes towards the e-learning environment

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Abstract. With the outbreak of COVID-19, universities worldwide were forced to quickly transition to online emergency teaching in order to secure the well-being of students and teachers. The paper analyses students' attitudes towards the use of the Microsoft Teams platform in the instruction of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Faculty of Technical Sciences Čačak during the winter semester 2020. The study focuses on students' engagement with e-learning, their motivation, and overall satisfaction with ESP instruction during pandemic conditions. The study was conducted with first-year students of engineering (N=79) using an online survey as an exploratory, qualitative research instrument. The findings of the research revealed that students have positive attitudes towards the use of Microsoft Teams in ESP instruction as the e-learning environment. The results suggest that all the available features of the tool are perceived as beneficial and easy to adapt to, with the recorded sessions of online lectures and online testing rated the most useful segments of the online ESP instruction.

Keywords: Microsoft Teams, English for specific purposes, attitudes, COVID-19, emergency remote teaching.

1. Introduction

One and a half years after the COVID-19 outbreak, almost every learner in the world has experienced a forced transition to online learning at a certain point (emergency remote teaching). About 1.5 billion students worldwide have been affected by the abrupt transition to online schooling (Holzapfel, 2020), partially or

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fully, which represents 70 % of the global student population (UNESCO, 2020). In such circumstances, online teaching of English as a foreign language as the only teaching method available has become a growing challenge for both teachers and students in tertiary education.

Students' attitudes and motivation are elements that play a pivotal role in language learning and are constantly in interaction (Martínez-Sáez, Sevilla-Pavón, & Gimeno-Sanz, 2018; Radovan & Markovec, 2015). Recent research suggests that positive attitudes towards the learning environment lead to higher learner satisfaction and confidence (Radovan & Markovec, 2015), whereas students' attitudes toward CALL represent a key factor for predicting the success in CALL (Zhang, 2011). A significant focus was recently placed on the effects of students' attitudes in CALL in regular teaching conditions (e.g. Delibegović & Hasanspahić, 2020), however, students' perceptions of Microsoft Teams as an e-environment in ESP have been under-researched (Keshtiarast & Salehi, 2020).

This study aims at investigating students' attitudes towards the use of the MS Teams platform in the instruction of ESP at the Faculty of Technical Sciences Čačak during the winter semester of 2020. The main goal of the research is to assess how students perceive the e-environment and MS Teams as a learning tool, in the emergency remote teaching circumstances.

2. Method and instrument

Exploratory, qualitative research (non-experimental method) was applied. Upon completion of the spring semester, 79 students were selected by purposeful sampling, and they were asked to complete an online questionnaire. It consists of five sections: (1) demography, (2) general learning routine and equipment used, (3) motivation and overall course, (4) online tests, and (5) benefits and shortcomings of the ESP course held using Teams. Out of 38 questions, the first eight questions are multiple-choice questions, and Questions 9-38 are given as statements with a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of the data collection instrument was determined by the Cronbach Alpha's Coefficient, with a result of 0.83.

3. Results and discussion

As for demography, 72.7% of the respondents are male, 26% are female, whereas 1.3% identify as 'other'. The majority of the respondents belong to the 18-20

age group (75.3%). Section 2 of the questionnaire was designed to investigate students' learning routine and the equipment used during the semester, reasons for skipping online classes and the MS Teams tools they used the most/least. In terms of equipment used, the respondents used: a laptop (35.1%), a phone (27.3%), a phone and a computer alternatively (27.3%), and a desktop computer (10.4%). As many as 32.5 % of students reported to have attended all classes, whereas 41.6% confessed to having missed only one to three classes in the whole semester.

Reasons for skipping classes differed; 'insecure Wi-Fi connection' leads the reasons list with 44% of respondents, 'being absent due to being employed' with 27.3%, 'classes timetable' with 22.7%, and 'lack of skills in Teams' with 3%. Finally, choices 'equipment issues' and 'my or someone else's illness' were chosen by 1.5% respondents respectively. As for the most frequently used MS Teams tools: 'video recordings of direct online lectures' was chosen by 45.5%, respondents, 'teacher's video calls (direct online classes)' by 29.9%, 'teaching materials in pdf, word' by 15.6%, chat messages by 2.6%, and finally, online tests by 6.5%. The least frequently used MS Teams tools were: chat messages (61%), teacher's direct video calls (direct online classes – 13%), teaching materials in pdf, word (11.7%), video recordings of direct online lectures (10.4%), and online tests (3.9%).

Section 3 of the questionnaire addressed students' motivation and overall course satisfaction. The results in Table 1 show that students evaluated both direct and recorded online classes positively (on a five-point Likert scale, one being 'disagree' and five being 'totally agree'). Direct online classes only moderately motivated them to attend the course (Item 9) and communicate with the teacher (Item 11), whereas the recorded classes were perceived as more motivating to better prepare for the exam (Item 16) or manage learning time effectively (Item 15). However, students gave the lowest evaluation to Statement 12 (M=3.5205) which refers to direct online classes as a motivator to communicate with their colleagues. The highest evaluation was given to Item 14 (M=4.3766) which measures whether the recorded classes motivated them to revise or study the chapters they had missed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on direct and recorded online classes

Statement		N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation
9	Direct online classes motivated me to attend the course fully.	77	1.00	5.00	3.9870	.97998
10	Direct online classes motivated me to actively participate in the course (communicate, share, etc.).	77	1.00	5.00	3.6753	1.10551

11	Direct online classes motivated me to communicate with the lecturer.	77	1.00	5.00	3.7662	1.11090
12	Direct online classes motivated me to communicate with my colleagues (fellow students).	73	1.00	5.00	3.5205	1.28138
13	Recorded online classes motivated me to study more.	77	1.00	5.00	3.9610	1.08144
14	Recorded online classes motivated me to revise/study the chapters I missed/ go back to chapters I did not learn.	77	1.00	5.00	4.3766	1.08869
15	Recorded online classes motivated me to better plan my studying time (manage time more effectively).	77	1.00	5.00	4.2727	.94083
16	Recorded online classes motivated me to prepare better for the final examination.	77	1.00	5.00	4.2857	.98485

Sections 4 and 5 investigated the benefits and shortcomings of the course and tests conducted via Teams, with the final five questions investigating future recommendations. After the descriptive statistical analysis was performed, the results showed that students expressed generally positive attitudes towards online tests and the overall course (all means > 4). However, students gave the lowest estimation to Item 35 (M=2.4177) which reads 'I would like to have future English courses exclusively in the classroom'. This concurs with the result calculated for Item 37 (M=4.0909) which reads: 'I would like to have future tests and classes exclusively online'. Students highly rated the flexibility and easy access of Teams as a tool (M=4.5769), but they gave the highest evaluation to the statement 'the Online Business English course in Teams was beneficial as I can replay the lectures and access the learning materials as many times as needed' (M=4.7722). Students also feel that a shortcoming of online classes in Teams is a lack of adequate home space to study and focus on learning (M=4.0127).

4. Conclusions

The conducted study revealed that students perceive MS Teams as a supportive learning environment in ESP, which enhances engagement and serves as a convenient, although technically demanding, tool. The most valuable features of the tool were video recordings of direct online lectures, which motivated students to revise or re-access the teaching material. The study also showed that students prefer online testing to traditional and would also like to have other upcoming courses in ESP online.

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