# ICT in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Teaching: Shifting to Informal Learning

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## Abstract

*The paper describes the author's teaching practice and research in deployment of different ICT to teaching English as a foreign language in different formal and informal educational contexts in two universities. The target audience is represented by the 1st and 2nd year students of IT faculty and Design faculty. The paper dwells upon formal, semi-formal and informal levels of using ICT to enhance learning. Much attention is paid to students' perceptions concerning different forms of ICT to develop and improve language skills. The paper represents quantitative and qualitative data on students' attitudes to different ICT. The research analysis focuses on LMS products at a formal level, selected web-sites and wiki-sites at semi-formal level and social networking sites (SNSs) at an informal level. The statistics and qualitative findings are available to show the shift in students' preferences to less formalized forms of ICT. The multi - phased research covers the period of four years.*

*Keywords: teaching practice, LMS, wiki-sites, social networking sites, language learning*

## 1. Introduction

Digitization in all spheres of the modern world has lead to significant changes and challenges. Teachers are facing the dilemma what technologies to use achieve the highest learning standards. The variety of information communication technologies (ICT) at the teachers' disposal is enormous. The Center for learning and performance technologies (2016) reported that more than 100 web-based technologies and software products are being used for educational purposes worldwide [1]. The process of deployment ICT to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) has been in the focus of research attention [2]. In this paper it is proposed to consider this process at three levels within the university structure (formal, semi-formal and informal). At each level a particular technology can be implemented.

## 2. Research methodology and methods

The research has been conducted since 2013 as a longitudinal study in two universities (Minin University, the Faculty of Design and Media Technologies) and the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), the Faculty of Information Technologies. The target audience is the students of 1st and 2nd courses who study EFL at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The total number of students currently involved in the study is 81 participants. The participation in the research is voluntary and the usage of the ICT at the semi-formal and informal levels is optional. However, LMS/Moodle course are obligatory components of teaching curriculum. A mixed methods approach was used to analyzing students' perceptions concerning different ICTs at all levels. The results of each stage of the process were publicized.

At the 1 stage a preliminary literature review was done to identify the best practices, challenges and the benefits of ICT which are used for EFL [3],[4],[5].

2 stage of the research was connected with exploring students' and teachers' perceptions at the formal level concerning deployment of LMS in the university. Semi-structured interviews were used to identify the challenges and advantages that this technology brings [6].

3 stage was started when the necessity to switch from LMS arose. The students were given the list of the sites as additional resources for language learning. Then they were asked to explore the sites and report their preferences and identify the problems they faced. At this stage several wiki-sites were proposed by the author to facilitate learning and enhance teacher-student relationships. The method of case study was used to identify the advantages and disadvantages of this ICT [7]. Besides the initial idea of using SNSs for scaffolding was tested [8].

4 stage of the research was connected with further switching to more informal forms of learning. The initial idea of launching the community in the social networking was suggested by the students who were preparing for IELTS. The first experience of using the SNSs was successful so other

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communities were launched to support different aspects of the EFL discipline (Academic writing, General English, IELTS).Technology acceptance model (TAM) was used as a theoretical framework at this stage to focus on the importance of this technology as a tool [9],[10],[11]. The purpose was to collect quantitative information about the extent to which students accept SNS as an educational tool using the constructs of TAM: perceived ease of use (PEU, perceived usefulness (PU), attitude, intention, actual use. The question about the external variables (challenges impeding and advantages enhancing the process) was introduced into the survey as an open-ended type to mix quantitative and qualitative components. The data for this phase were collected from two groups of undergraduate students preparing for IELTS. 5 stage of the research is connected with the integration process when ICT are used at all three levels within the teaching process. The effective deployment of ICT at all the levels can be conducted using a holographic approach to present the process of implementation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon taking place simultaneously at different levels within the university structure [12].

## 3. Findings
The findings of the research focus the attention on the three dimensions (formal, semi-informal and informal) to see the shift from formal learning to informal environment.

### 3.1 Formal level
At the formal level LMS/Moodle creates an educational platform for the formal teacher-student (T-S) interaction. LMS has been developed in (HSE) since 2010 and in Minin university since 2013. The purpose of the system is to improve the level and the quality of methodical, didactic, informational support for educational process for all the participants: students, teachers, and managers of different faculties. It offers a more individual approach to learning and teaching [13]. Besides, LMS can be used to develop a variety of educational products (for example, a virtual library of tests, interactive vocabulary practice programs, grammar activators, language laboratories, etc) to support the needs of particular groups. The system offers obvious advantages and benefits but both teachers and students are reluctant to use it. To better know what problems LMS users face in the HSE we conducted a research (2013) among the students and the teachers. Two sets of questionnaires were worked out to ask about the problems and advantages of the system from the users' point of view. The analysis of the responses pointed to the fact that the majority of students does not enjoy working in the LMS (53% respondents) and 47 % of the respondents approve the system. The difference is not so great to give the evidence that LMS is not attractive for students. As for the teachers, 60 % of the respondents think positively and are motivated to incorporate the LMS into teaching. One quarter does not see the necessity to apply it unless it is imposed from above. 15 % of the respondents think there is no point using the system at all as it distracts students' attention from the essence of the subject. Such unwillingness can be explained, to some extent, by technological hurdles that make the usage time-consuming and effort taking [14]. According to the findings the main complaints about the system cover the following problems: i).design and visual presentation; ii). technical issues; iii). pedagogical aspect. Statistics were available to show that more than one third of the learners out of 40 students-participants (32, 5 %) think that mail services or social networks are more convenient and less consuming to share and disseminate the information. The students consider the LMS as an academic environment imposed from above. That is why they prefer less formal and more relaxing ways to exchange and interact [15].

### 3.2 Semi-formal level
At the semi-formal level wiki-technologies can be used to achieve the aim of collaboration and active learning. Web-quests, wiki-sites and Google forms are believed to support an English course and facilitate T-S interaction. For instance, wiki-sites are proposed as an effective scaffolding platform to support a particular discipline. Scaffolding is a form of learner support provided in a various ways, assigning a number of roles and responsibilities for students, lecturers, instructors, experts and other participants in the educational environment [16]. They are created to support a particular discipline. The sites could be a virtual platform for e-learning within the university structure (.https://sites.google.com/site/espteaching/). Besides this tool allows the teacher to combine different ICT: forums, blogs, media stores, students' presentations (https://sites.google.com/site/intbusinesspreinterm/presentations-lang-leader).
Google forms are one more example of project collaboration and dissemination of knowledge within the group of learners. Google forms can be useful in group writing or doing a research project . In addition to wiki sites and forms the students are recommended to use of extra sites for English

practice. The research conducted at this stage showed students' motivation to use other forms of ICT. The main complaints were limited amount of free resources on these sites, much advertising or other distracters, the necessity to sign up, time to get an access, difficult navigation or inconvenient interface etc.

### 3.3 Informal level

To analyze the students' preferences and decide which interactive technology they are accustomed to use for studying purposes on a regular basis a survey (2015) was conducted. The following issues were addressed: the frequency of using LMS or social networking in their studies, the attitude towards the introduction and utility of the system, their preferences, problems and the advantages enjoyed. This study was an attempt to understand how the attitude to LMS has changed since 2013 and what other technologies can be effectively employed additionally at an informal level to engage students and raise their motivation.

The survey was conducted with 22 students of IT faculty of HSE. The findings showed that the attitude towards working in LMS has changed for the better in comparison with 2013-2014 (73 % of the respondents were used to working in LMS but only 18% did it often on the regular basis). The majority of students (68%) think that it is a very good, "innovative idea" and claimed that the most important advantage is the quality of downloaded materials. The weakest points of the system are connected either with a difficult access or the interface or the lack of entertaining content.  Despite a positive feedback, LMS products are still not favored by students' audience. As for social networks, the main advantages are the following: convenience, access through mobile phones, design and interactive mode. This survey resulted in proposing a more interactive flexible approach to satisfy students' demand. It was decided (in collaboration with students) to launch two groups in a popular Russian network for providing the learners with more materials for language learning. The idea was so popular that one group was launched by a student, while the other was launched by the author.  The names of both groups were suggested by the students: An early bird or a night owl? (IELTS learners) https://vk.com/club82296318 and Englishmania (for all learners) https://vk.com/club86251851. The total number of the followers now is 203 students and the number is growing.

In 2016 the suggestion of launching SNSs for Academic writing (in HSE) and General English studies (Minin University) was supported by the students. In both cases surveys were conducted to find out students' perceptions and attitude to the suggestion. Two online surveys were developed (using www.surveymonkey.com) to find out the effectiveness of SNSs for learning needs. The results showed the high level of agreement among students of both universities on ease and usefulness of accepting SNS as an educational tool.

### 4. Conclusion

The study under consideration aims at showing how important it is to take into account students' trajectories in choosing ICT for EFL.The fifth stage of the research is in progress and a course which will combine all three levels within one discipline is under development. It is believed that LMS/ Moodle educational products and wiki sites at a semi formal level can be blended with informal SNSs to support a particular discipline.  The research has provided some evidence to the fact that different ICTs solve different aims. LMS products fill in the formal component of the education process, while semi formal wiki-sites can create more flexible working environment and more opportunities for students to feel freedom and choice in choosing different types of ICTs. SNSs turn out to be an effective educational tool to target learners outside the university. In changing educational environment which is saturated with a variety of ICTs, the role of the teacher is becoming multifaceted and complicated. When deploying ICTs the priority should be given to well-structured learning materials. Switching from formal learning to informal learning environment of social networks requires new pedagogies and opens new dimensions for further exploration in this field.

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