What does the Net Generation think about ICT and Information Literacy in a Language Learning Context in Higher Education?

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Abstract

Today's university students are exposed to a vast amount of Information and Communication Technologies, both professionally and privately. The Internet and various technological devices have changed study habits of students across the globe. Much research has focused on students' information literacy, that means the lifelong need to be able to recognize when information is needed, to locate and to evaluate it and to use the electronically retrieved information correctly and effectively. This paper discusses a small-scale study based on questionnaires that was conducted in summer term 2017 at the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. The data were collected within the course German Language and Culture, frequented by learners with German as L1. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it provides initial insights into first-year university students' perceptions of their own information literacy competence. Second, it offers a better understanding of students' perspective on the supply, the requirements and the usefulness concerning the use of ICT when studying languages in higher education.

Keywords: language learning in higher education; students' perceptions; information literacy competence

1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a better understanding of Austrian university students' perspective on ICT in language learning. A growing body of research has recently focused on students' multifaceted literacy skills (e.g. media literacy, information literacy) or lack thereof. [1,2,3] However, as Eynon & Malmberg point out, far too little attention has been paid to "the relationship between self-concept for learning and the uptake of online opportunities or online information seeking." [4:518] Although it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the theory of self-concept, it aims to shed valuable insight on the learners' perspective on the use of ICT in language teaching and learning. Consequently, special emphasis will be devoted to students' self-descriptions of their ICT habits.

By drawing on the notion of *digital natives*, a term coined by Prensky [5], Schulmeister [6] has convincingly shown that notwithstandig the so-called Net Generations' growing up with the Internet and multiple digital and mobile devices, Net Geners are by no means automatically net savvy or technologically savvy. In my view, the broader perspective on this generation adopted by Barnett [7:41] is extremely helpful when discussing their conditions and dispositions in today's world. He stresses the importance of higher education to offer "a space in which to provide students with the psychic and cognitive resources to go on learning in this crazy world", described by him as uncertain and turbulent. As far as uncertainty and turbulence is concerned, he characterizes today's students as having to deal with multifaceted complexities and living multi-modal lives, "in an age of uncertainty" [7:31].

2. Course settings and survey method

So far I have focused on the general framework of teaching the current generation of students. I will now turn to the specific Austrian context within I conducted a questionnaire-based study at the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Graz. In 2014, this University developed an e-learning strategy that was institutionalized as part of the Universities strategic considerations, stressing the notion of e-learning as a supplement rather than a substitute for offline teaching and learning. [8] One of the main changes affecting teachers and students alike was the introduction of the course and learning management system Moodle, which is grounded in a socio-constructivist theory of learning and provides "a set of tools that support an inquiry- and discovery-based approach to online learning". [9:16] Turning now to the course I was teaching using Moodle, I will contextualize it within the bachelor's programme.

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2.1 German Language and Culture course

The BA Transcultural Communication prepares students for a master's programme in Translation or Interpreting. Students attend courses in their first and two foreign languages. Besides language skills, they can acquire comprehensive knowledge of the social, political, cultural and economic situation of the three respective countries and are introduced to different approaches in Translation Studies.

This paper focuses on the course *German Language and Culture*, which I have been teaching for several years now. Participants are first-year students with German as L1. The workload for students, apart from at least 80 percent attendance of class sessions, consists of: self-study tasks, in-class work in pairs or in groups, presentations, extensive reading and a variety of written and spoken tasks focusing on German grammar, lexicon, cultural history and regional studies. Students are continuously assessed, have to do home assignments and a written exam at the end of the term. The course is taught 2 hours per week and 3 ECTS credit points are given at successful completion.

2.2 The questionnaire-based study

Having introduced the setting in which the survey was carried out, in this section I will present the data collection method. In accordance with the classification offered by Allen & Seaman [10:6], distinguishing between traditional, web-facilitated, blended/hybrid and online courses, the course *German Language and Culture* can be considered as web-facilitated, as it uses "web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course", *not* depending mainly on online content delivery or online discussions.

As I used Moodle for teaching this class of 35 students (33 female, 2 male), I was interested in the students' perception of usefulness of ICT, in the way they compared provision of ICT with expectations, but also in their attitudes to ICT and their feeling of competence in this respect.

At the end of summer term 2017, I distributed a paper-based questionnaire (4 pages long with 26 questions) covering 5 two-point questions, 9 multiple choice questions, 11 scaled questions using a 1-to-6 Likert scale, and one open-ended question. Since there were only two male students in the group, I deliberately did not ask gender as biodata in the questionnaire to guarantee anonymity. On the day of the distribution 23 students aged between 18 and 25 were present. As a result, in the next chapter I will discuss my findings based on 23 questionnaires.

3. Findings and Discussion

As outlined in the introduction, the Net Generation is seen by many researchers [5] as net savvy, a notion that prompted me to take a closer look at the students I was teaching. The previously stated purpose of the study was twofold. First, I was interested in students' perception of their own information literacy competence. And second, *their* understanding of the provision, the requirements and of a possible added value to the learning experience through the use of ICT should be identified. Both research interests will be addressed in what follows.

3.1 Students' perceptions of information literacy

Part of the questionnaire required respondents to give information on their individual sense of competence when using ICT in general, but also especially for language learning. The most striking result is that only 5 of 23 students described themselves as extremely competent (3) or very competent (2) when using ICT generally. When asked about their confidence with ICT for language learning, the results are similar: extremely competent (2) and very competent (4), showing that only 6 of 23 respondents perceived their information literacy competence as rather high.

In this respect, it is important to distinguish between competence and confidence, since it makes a difference if students are competent or just confident as Oblinger & Hawkins argue: "Having no fear is not the same as having knowledge or skill." [1:12] Either way, the results indicate that in this cohort the majority feels stretched by the use of ICT at university and clearly pushed beyond their comfort zones.

In order to get an overall picture of how students perceived an information literate person, one open-ended question asking for the description of such a person was included. Interestingly, only 12 of 23 respondents chose to comment on this, but their descriptions give revealing insights. After coding their comments, a highly significant picture has emerged. This is what students' descriptions of an information literate person look like:

1. competent acquisition and usage of information (7x)
2. competent and critical evaluation of information (6x)
3. technical knowledge and competencies (4x)
4. self-discipline when dealing with distractions and interruptions (2x)

Considering these first results, the question raises of what can be done to support students in becoming such a person, someone who feels confident as well as competent when using ICT for language learning.

3.2 Students' perspective on ICT

The findings clearly show that the informants are generally positive in their assessment of the provision of ICT at their University (19 of 23 rated it as extremely = 10, or very satisfying = 9). Over half of those surveyed reported that ICT requirements were considerably higher than at school (18 of 23) and the same number (18 of 23) found that the University should provide students with ICT skills. This accords with a study by Lorenzo & Dziuban [3:14] who expressed the relevance of teaching information literacy skills throughout formal education, preventing teachers to "fault the level below them for the learning and knowledge inadequacies of students".

Asked about the usefulness of Moodle for both their bachelor's programme and for the German language course under scrutiny in both cases 21 of 23 students articulated a high regard for its application. Surprisingly, the overall usefulness of ICT for language learning was found to be rather low with only 11 of 23 rating it as extremely (5) or very (6) useful. In line with Schulmeister's [6] observations of students' rather pragmatic and rational use of ICT, the data show that the most frequently accessed course-specific materials in Moodle were general course information (20), a detailed syllabus (22) and the evaluation grid (12). A rather disappointing finding was that additional learning material I uploaded in Moodle was used by only 2 of 23 students. 10 of 23 reported to having it at least accessed and browsed through.

4. Conclusions

In summary, the analysis of this study has led to the following barely encouraging overall results. Austrian students aged between 18 and 25, the typical Net Geners, do not feel very net savvy. Additionally, they hardly ever access course-specific learning material, concentrating only on web-based administrative course information. Nevertheless, these findings may help us understand that in higher education we should think about the potential of various web-based technologies as opportunities for meaningful learning experiences. [11] Lorenzo & Dziuban [3:11] emphasize the idea of information literacy as being fundamentally a learning issue and argue that it is our duty as teachers to give our students "more opportunities to enhance their search, evaluation, and communication skills." I totally agree with Oblinger & Hawkins [1] that the long-term effort and lifelong need to develop skills such as information gathering, critical thinking and problem-solving will support students in this complex, rapidly changing world.

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