Chapter 13

EFL Learners’ Usability Evaluation of an Educational Website: Does Gender Make a Difference?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to depict the perception of usability of an educational website among EFL students. Forty-two medical science students of two general English courses at Tehran University participated in the study. For one semester the students used the educational website designed to support in-class instruction to learn English as a foreign language. At the end of the course students were given a usability evaluation questionnaire to evaluate the usability of the website with respect to: content, navigation, user interface design, performance and effectiveness, general instructional objectives, the website parts, and language related objectives. Conclusively, students were roughly satisfied with the usability of the website. Further, user interface design of the website was considered to be usable while the performance and effectiveness of the website were not perceived to be very useable. Comparison of female and male participants showed that in general female students were more satisfied with the usability of the website, specifically with the user interface design of the website.

INTRODUCTION

Online Language Learning (OLL) is considered a complementary element of learning in the modern era of education as a result of the widespread use of the Internet and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools (Blake, 2011). In spite of the substantial number and developing nature of such tools, websites are among those which are perceived to be the most popular and functional by Internet users. As a result of that, many academic centers devote a great deal of time and resources to develop educational websites to promote their students’ learning outcome (Kember, McNaught, Chong, Lam, & Cheng, 2010). However, research shows mixed findings on the role of educational
websites in promoting learning outcome. An extensive review of numerous studies comparing face-to-face and technology-supported instruction has revealed that the use of technology per se has no significant impact on learning outcomes (Johnson & Aragon, 2003). When compared to textbooks, websites create an opportunity for higher interaction among students as stated in Kong (2009); but this opportunity does not necessarily guarantee better learning outcome. On the contrary, many administrators and parents believe that spending too much time in websites, educational or non-educational- is counterproductive to students’ learning. Further, the type of website, the designer, and the content are all important elements that affect instructional value of a website.

Reviewing the developmental history of Web and its technologies shows that the websites of the 21th century should be interactive and smart and give the users the opportunity to become a virtual community when they are online. The use of Web 2.0 and to Web 1.0 is preferred as Web 2.0 requires more than just a passive, view-only and one-way interaction on the part of the users. In this framework, when students are dealing with web content they become engaged in their own process of learning as a moderator, i.e. they have some sort of control over choosing web materials. Further, they can share their experience with peers or the teacher as they are exploring the web, a quality which is absent in studying text books. The tools that make such two-way communication possible are namely grouped as Synchronous CMC (SCMC) and Asynchronous CMC (ACMC). While the former includes many online communication applications through which the participants can have simultaneous interaction (e.g. chat rooms and video chat tools such as Skype); the latter mainly refers to the tools that allow for having interaction even when one of the participants is offline or with time delay (such as emails, instant messaging systems and messengers). Moreover, the integration of different Web 2.0 features in the form of podcasting and blogging or other CMC applications into a website have created an enjoyable context for the practice of many school subjects especially language (Küfi & Özgür, 2009). The benefit of using Web in the class room is not limited to just making students more interested or motivated as some studies have reported higher level learning when web is integrated into teaching (Tanyeli, 2009).

It is too simplistic to think that any type of website can bring about higher level of motivation and learning outcome. The interplay of many factors guarantee the success of integrating technology-based learning environments, the most important one is the way an educational website is designed and how it satisfies the needs of its users (Brinck, Gergle, & Wood, 2002). Since needs vary from one group of users to another, a single website design cannot fit all users’ needs. Users’ personal characteristics such as age, gender, the level of education, familiarity with technology and attitudes towards the technology affect their needs. On the other hand, there are different aspects related to the design of a website such as the interface, the language, the graphic, and the content that should reflect and fulfill users’ needs. Therefore, perceiving a website as ‘usable’ depends on both the users’ individual characteristics and the design of the website.

One way to understand if a website fulfills the needs of its users is evaluating its usability, or how easy the interface is to use (Hasan, 2014). The aim of usability evaluation is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of an educational website to improve the degree of interaction between users and the website. Addressing the usability of websites adds to its functionality, creates positive attitudes towards it among students (Agarwal & Venkatesh, 2002), helps students to enjoy using the website for learning, and increases their confidence in technology-based learning environments (Hasan, 2014).

Despite the importance of making educational websites usable, few studies have probed into this issue especially in designing language learning