Chapter 6


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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study that examines learners’ beliefs towards technology use with specific focus on the development of learner autonomy in a blended context within a post-secondary English for academic purposes (EAP) program. The growth of post-secondary EAP programs along with the researchers’ awareness and interest in leveraging technological tools in support of student-centered learning motivated this research. Findings reveal students’ overall positive attitude towards technology use and adoption of some 21st century skills in learning English. When innovative pedagogical methods are supported by intervention in learning, a heightened critical awareness and movement towards learner autonomy was observed among students through fostering of some 21st century competencies. The chapter concludes with recommendations for teacher education in tech-enhanced pedagogy, teacher-intervention in educating students about the rationale for technology use, leveraging students’ digital resources and ongoing critical and reflective teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifteen years, both Canada and the U.S. have seen dramatic increases in international student enrolment in post-secondary institutions (Statistics Canada, 2016). This intense internationalization of higher education further incites the need for growth of crucial post-secondary English language programs within the North American and American context specifically. On the one hand, technology-enhanced programs are an emerging strategy to support such growth and, on the other, educational technology

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incorporation can benefit English language learning by enhancing learner autonomy, language output, collaboration, learning communities and the development of 21st century skills (Kessler, Bikowski & Boggs, 2012). Autonomy is defined as “a precondition for effective learning; when learners succeed in developing autonomy, they not only become better language learners, but they also develop into more responsible and critical members of the communities in which they live” (Benson, 2011, p. 1). In keeping with this statement, the study investigated whether the technological components used in learning English paved the way towards more independent and self-sufficient learning “exceed[ing] the designers’ [the EAP teacher’s] original intentions . . . [and] leading to new ways of teaching and learning” (Hanson-Smith, 2000, p. 2, as cited in Benson, 2011, p. 149). Furthermore, the study explored Benson’s (2011) autonomy framework to see whether students’ believed to have “use[d] technology to learn content and skills – so that they know how (original italicized) to learn, think critically, solve problems, use information, communicate, innovate and collaborate” (Dede, 2010, p. 56) as these activities are essential components of 21st century competencies. The development of learner autonomy is deeply connected to the growth of these 21st century competencies that help build global citizens who are equipped with “learning and thinking skills,” “information and communications technology (ICT) literacy,” and “life skills” (Dede, 2010, p. 58). That is why it is important to observe these skills being adopted towards a successful and meaningful language learning curriculum and pedagogy. The blended learning (BL) environment on the other hand, is able to accommodate various learning styles and modes that complement individual and collaborative technology-enhanced learning practices and is in sync with the development of 21st century skills and learner autonomy. Hence arises the need for research of such components and contexts.

Benson (2011) believes that autonomy related gains in learners’ ability to learn languages involve questions like, whether the learners are able to interact with authentic target language texts, whether the learners are able to create situations of learning for themselves and whether the learners are able to monitor and self-assess their own performances. Although reliable testing instruments to measure abilities of this kind have yet to be developed, “evidences of ability to learn can often rely on direct observation of learners’ at work, on analysis of records of work and learning outcomes, or on learners’ self-report” (Benson, 2011, p. 211). In an effort to explore these aspects of autonomy, this research applies a multi-phased, partly grounded-theoretical approach involving complementary data sources including two online surveys conducted at the beginning and at the end of the program, class observations, individual students’ digital diary (DD) writing, stimulated recall (SR) interviews, focus group (FG) interviews and teacher interview. Benson’s (2011) learner autonomy framework is used to investigate students’ interactions and teacher practices with the six approaches in order to categorize areas where technology appears to facilitate autonomy and also influence learner beliefs about tech-enhanced language learning.

THE BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (A DEFINITION)

Understanding the blended context is pertinent to this study, because the EAP course that is the subject of this research fits the definition of a blended environment, where a lot of the teaching and learning activities took place online as well as face-to-face (FTF). Also, it will provide an understanding of the extent and nature of use of specific tools in and outside of the classroom that shaped students’ beliefs. Singh and Reed (2001) from a corporate software development perspective, highlight optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery through adopting the BL approach. They believe that
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