STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS A SPECIALLY DESIGNED LANGUAGE LEARNING PLATFORM IN A RUSSIAN ONLINE LANGUAGE SCHOOL

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Abstract:

Extreme times call for extreme measures, thus the request for using technology in teaching during the previous couple of years was inevitable. Suddenly, all people, regardless of their age, had to get used to the idea of a computer or mobile phone as a means of connection between a teacher and students. Moreover, learning content was adapted to the new media. This consequently led to the occurrence of a large number of platforms for online studying, interactive concepts the aim of which was to motivate, intrigue students and make them feel comfortable in using them.

Not only was it challenging to adapt the teaching to the new situation, but the question of which platforms to use was of paramount importance. There were not enough research data about the effectiveness of their usage, what is more, students became fastidious and required their needs to be catered for. Therefore, this research has tapped into the question of students' attitudes towards the specific platform as a learning tool used in an online school for learning English in Moscow. The level of appreciation has been found to be rather high. Nevertheless, it has been discovered that the weaknesses which concerned them are mostly connected to the mistakes in materials and they require more choices, more additional materials and tests, which is a food for thought for the school itself.

Further research about attitudes towards similar platforms could outline the needs and expectations of students for the future.

Keywords:

Online platform, e-learning, learning languages, attitudes.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the first notion of digital natives occurred in education with Prensky's [1] discussion about the fundamental differences in processing information for the generations nowadays compared to their predecessors, the question of using technology in education became the pinnacle of modern research. The times of the pandemic only highlighted the importance and provoked a plethora of research on the given topic such as [2]. Moreover, a number of new platforms, digital tools, learning contents and systems appeared during the pandemic [3]. It is obvious that people of all ages and educational backgrounds had to get used to the idea of studying online.

For digital natives such concept was not intimidating, moreover, it seemed quite natural, whereas digital immigrants found the idea challenging. The needs of modern learners altogether seem to have been covered by e-learning. Overall, students' preferences still need to be explored, hence this study focuses on assessing the opinions and attitudes of language learners towards a specialized learning platform.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. BASIC CONCEPTS

IT, or more precisely ICT (Information and communication technologies), represents the main constituent of modern education and intertwines the present teaching and learning processes [4]. We are perceiving a paradigm change in our schools, moving from teacher-centred to learner-focused studying [5]. Learner-focus leads to more learner autonomy, which, consequently, increases the importance of self-study sections in learning tools.

E-learning can be defined in various ways. According to Oxford dictionary e-learning is "a system of learning that uses electronic media, typically over the internet" [6]. Some researchers called it "the learning supported by digital electronic tools and media" [7] considering it to be a part of digital learning. Anderson claims that e-learning implies learning via all electronic media, whereas online learning focuses only on learning via net. [4] He also added that e-learning embraces learning with and through ICT.

It is not an easy task to create a web-based learning environment. There are a lot of different aspects to be taken into consideration starting from pedagogy, psychology, software and knowledge engineering and ICT technologies [8].

The most favourable prospects of using technology in language learning classes is the opportunity of connecting learners in authentic communication to the native speakers, both synchronously and asynchronously [9] in which case language learning platforms are of paramount importance.

2.2. LANGUAGE LEARNING PLATFORMS

A challenging task placed in front of most educators today is the choice of appropriate language learning platform. There are myriad options and the number is constantly increasing. Pragmatic choices need to be made having in mind pedagogical implications, costs, user-friendly interfaces, possibilities for using the platforms on various devices. Bates [10] discusses the challenges of deciding on the right model, claiming that there cannot be only one "best" model.

Special attention should be paid to the interfaces of e-learning programmes, since they are becoming more and more elaborate, catchy and intricate, packed with information and highly developed graphics. This could lead to students focusing more on technology and not the materials [11]. Additionally, Pang and Pang mentioned that personalization is a significant constituent of e-learning and that it is important to choose learning preferences according to students' needs. All of these points have to be taken in consideration when choosing the right learning platform.

2.3. E-LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

According to Hodges et al. [12] attitudes of students towards online instruction and everything implied by such instruction can affect the perception of success in their studying. Yang and Chen [13] reviewed in their study a lot of research which has been performed so far, proving that the use of multimedia technology resulted in positive effects on language teaching in quite a few respects: facilitating communication, reducing anxiety and increasing confidence, encouraging oral discussions, improving motivation and all the language skills, as well as creating cultural awareness.

It was concluded that new computer technologies provide more visually stimulating material, can address various learning styles, incorporate authentic material and provide authentic communication via web in the target language, encourage cultural comparisons and bring competency in language skills [14]. Studies were conducted to prove the efficiency of various tools and most of them found statistically significant difference showing that computer-based learning contributed to more retention and better results [15] [16] [17].

3. RESEARCH

3.1. CONTEXT

The research was performed on a group of 36 students of an online English language school, TreeWords, from Moscow, Russia. The school started working in 2013. focusing on one-to-one lessons with students of all ages and levels. However, initially the target group were adult students. In 2014, a special platform was developed by a team of computer programmers using Ruby backend programming language, Rails programming framework, AngularJS front-end javascript framework, PostgreSQL database management system. Furthermore, this platform was incorporated as a part of the website and a group of methodologists produced materials for learning English through 17 different types of courses.

TreeWords platform offers learning materials with activities such as drag-and-drop, fill-in-the-blanks, write an essay question, upload a video answer, matching, multiple choice activities and similar. It is designed to function in combination with Zoom, additionally, it tracks students' progress, the time spent on doing the activities and generates an archive of recorded videos teachers create when having face-to-face lessons with the learners.

The aim of the research was to analyse the students' attitudes towards the TreeWords platform and their assessment of the impact the platform has on their learning.

3.2. PROCEDURE

An online survey was sent to a group of 100 students studying at the given moment and 36 of them completed the form. The survey consists of 16 questions, 6 multiple choice closed-ended questions asking about the gender,
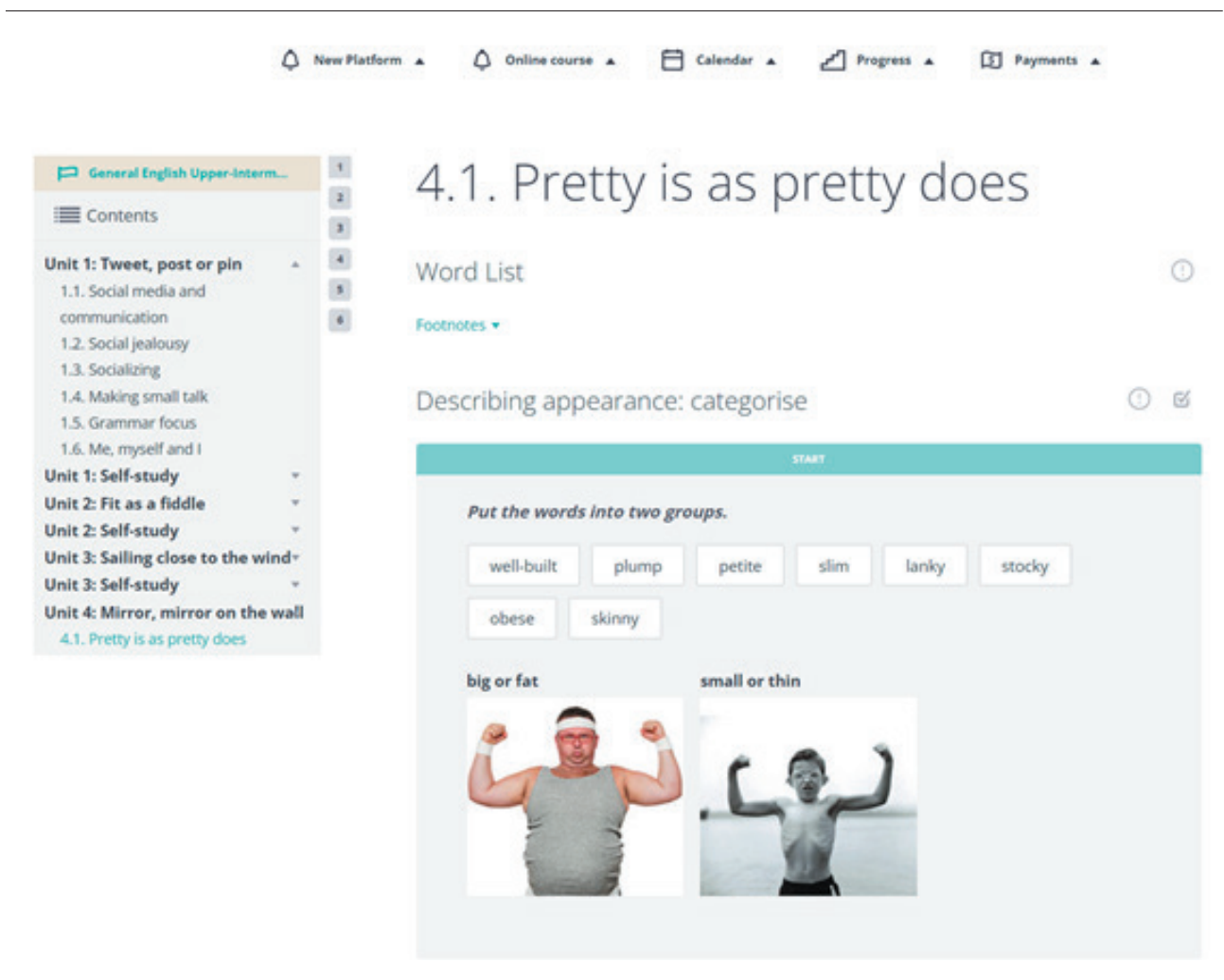

Figure 1 - TreeWords platform sample page

age, level of English, the time spent studying at school, the frequency of using the platform and their personal feelings about the effectiveness of the platform on their studying. Furthermore, 6 additional closed-ended questions were added using a Likert scale from 1 to 10, specifically checking the attitudes towards the platform: general satisfaction with it, its appeal, ease of use, availability, interactive content. The final part has four open-ended questions asking the students to write about the things they like the most, then those they like the least on the platform, their previous experiences using any other learning platforms and possible comparison, as well as an open space for suggestions.

A mixed method was applied for the analysis using IBM SSPS Statistics software, version 26, for quantitative descriptive statistics review of the closed-ended questions in this small scale research and a description of answers to open-ended ones as a qualitative part of the research.

3.3. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

For the six questions specifically about the platform, where Likert scale was used on a scale from 1 to 10, the mean value is from 8.44 to 9.08 which is an amazing result, showing that as a rule students are satisfied with the platform, its availability, ease of use, appeal and would recommend studying with it. The highest standard deviation is 1.66 meaning that most of the answers were highly positive.

All age groups are present in the study. The largest number of students is between 36 and 45 years old. Having in mind the difference in the mindset among different ages, it comes as a bit of surprise that satisfaction with the platform is so high with the older students.

The mean value for the satisfaction was the smallest for people older than 56 and the age group 26–35 with it being 6.00 and 6.60 respectively. Standard deviation for the group in the middle is stunning 2.30, which could be explained by higher expectations of these students. The youngest students are the most satisfied with the platform (M: 9.75, SD: 0.50).

According to Pearson correlations there is no significant correlation between the variables of age, gender, level of English and satisfaction, ease of use, appeal of the platform. The only weak correlation, which was expected, is between the number of years studying at TreeWords and the level of English with the Pearson correlation of 0.462.

It can be concluded that the higher the level the less students use the platform, as presented in the Figure below.

3.4. QUALITATIVE OVERVIEW

It is obvious from the Likert scale answers that the majority of students approve of the platform, however, they listed some weaknesses that annoy them. Most of those are connected to the problems with mistakes in materials and situations in which a platform does not recognize their correct answers first, if they are written in a short form (e.g. isn't instead of is not) and then if there is a possibility of having more than one correct option. On the other hand, the main advantages of the platform are predominantly connected to a good interface and the ease of use. The table below shows some of the answers for these two questions.

The platform has courses with two parts: one intended for face-to-face work with a teacher using Zoom, and another as self-study material which is used asynchronously for homework.

Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean value	Standard deviation
How satisfied are you with the platform?	3.00	10.00	8.4444	1.66381
How would you rate the availability of the platform?	6.00	10.00	9.0833	1.02470
How would you rate the ease of use of the platform?	6.00	10.00	8.8889	1.14087
How would you rate the appeal of the platform?	4.00	10.00	8.6667	1.53064
Do you think learning a language is easier with such interactive content?	5.00	10.00	8.9167	1.33898
How likely are you to recommend the TreeWords platform to others?	5.00	10.00	9.0833	1.36015

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics for questions about platform satisfaction

Age	Mean value	N	Standard deviation
Up to 10	9.7500	4	0.50000
11-15	9.1667	6	0.98319
16-25	8.4000	5	1.34164
26-35	6.6000	5	2.30217
36-45	8.2000	10	1.54919
46-55	9.4000	5	0.89443
Over 56	6.0000	1	
Total	8.4444	36	1.66381

Table 2 – Correlation between age and satisfaction with the platform

The idea of having the self-study section appeals to students, since the platform can give an immediate feedback. For this reason accuracy is of great concern for the users.

Only one student used another platform for learning a language, which was focusing more on the listening tasks and audio approach to learning, but there was no comparison to the TreeWords platform. No specific suggestions were given. Majority of students simply skipped the question or gave supportive words for the future of the school.

4. CONCLUSION

This narrowly focused research showed an incredible level of satisfaction with the language learning platform for students of all ages. They can feel it helps them with the progress, mostly use it on a weekly basis and are happy with the design. However, in the rapidly changing world the platform as a tool needs to keep up with the developments and retain the cutting edge quality it possesses at the moment. Furthermore, it is essential to regularly update learning materials, as one of the main
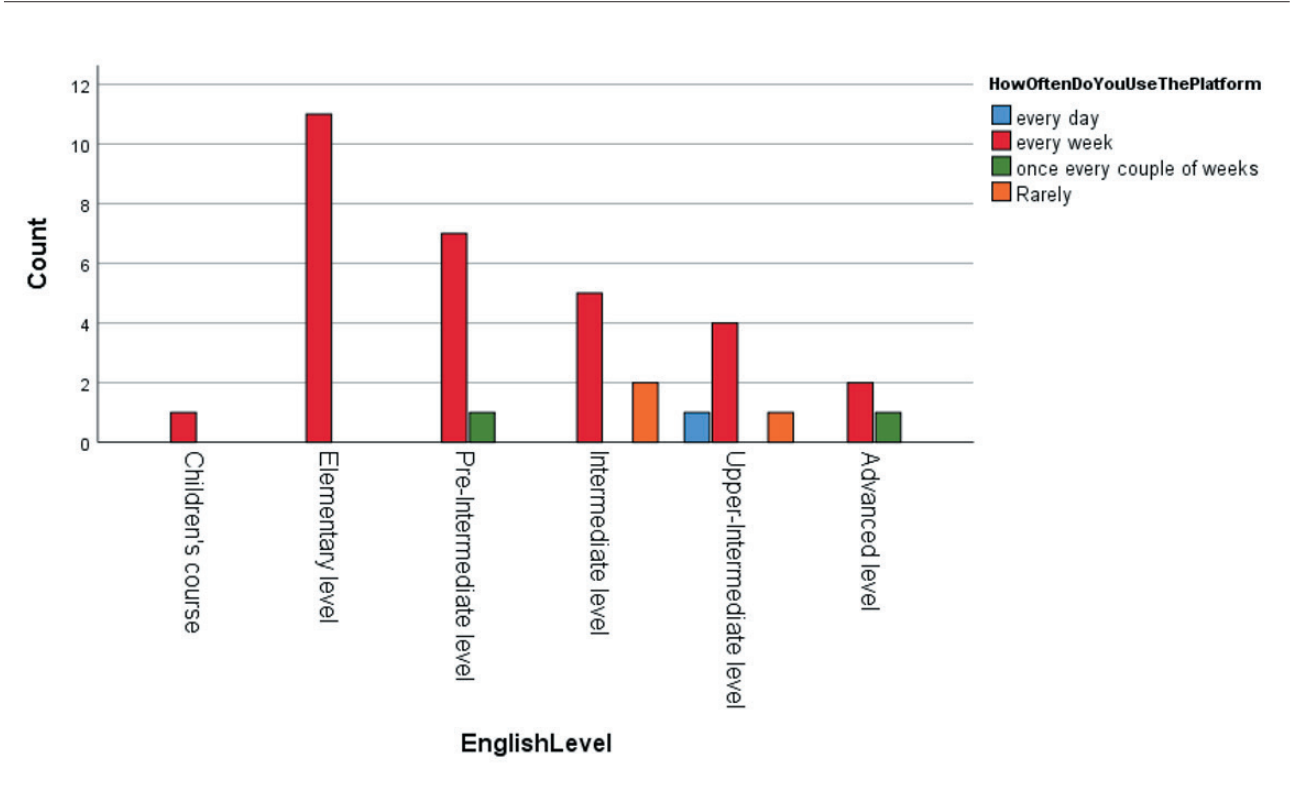

Figure 2 – Bar chart on the correlation of the English level and the frequency of using the platform

What do you like most about the platform?	What do you like least about the platform?
That I can use it whenever I want.	Mistakes in the materials.
The possibility to discuss the materials on the platform with a teacher.	Sometimes I don't understand the questions.
Just the experience of using it.	Menu with sections.
I like pictures and links to authentic materials.	Sometimes difficult to use. The things you need are in the wrong places.
I like the design.	Sometimes there are bugs.
Very convenient.	We need more additional materials.
There is a diversity of topics.	You need to constantly log in and not stay logged in all the time.
It's easier to learn when you use it.	More tests.
I like the time tracking option.	Explanations are in pictures and you can't copy the text.
Available lessons archive.	The platform sometimes does not open on a place I stopped the previous time.
It's easy to use.	

Table 3 – Advantages and disadvantages of the platform

shortcomings, perceived by the students, is not having enough materials or mistakes that appear to be present within the activities. A multitude of the inaccuracies mentioned are connected to having more than one possible answer to a question which were not all recorded in the system and were then seen as mistakes. Such observations highlight the importance of IT experts collaborating closely with content writers and constantly working on the improvements of the possible answers.

Additional challenge would be to have the students use more than one platform as an online learning tool and make a research about their opinions afterwards and definitely test the effectiveness by comparing the results of working with the platform to using a different one or no platform at all. This comparative view would definitely show the preferences of learners in general. A suggestion for the further research would be to include teachers as well, check their standpoints and compare them with the students' points of view. This kind of analysis, focusing a bit more on the attitudes of both sides in the learning process, can help in developing the exceptional platform which could further motivate and promote e-learning.

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