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EXPLORING THE ATTITUDES OF PHILOLOGY STUDENTS CONCERNING THE USE OF DIGITAL RESOURCES. A CASE STUDY

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***Abstract:** The present paper brings into discussion a very topical issue for students and teachers alike nowadays – the development of digital competence for students in the field of humanities. The research focuses on investigating possible changes in the attitudes of philology students towards the use of technology, as they are facing the reality of having to adapt their learning and/or their teaching to the new educational demands. Since the present educational context involved a quick change to online teaching and learning, the research focused on how the group of students in humanities have adapted to this setting, whether operating in this digitalised learning/teaching environment has any implications for their future career and whether the identified changes are connected to any lessons learnt both in their capacity of learners and teachers.*

***Keywords:** digital competence, attitudes, digital natives, lifelong learning skills*

1. Introductory note

Research on digitally related teaching and learning will undoubtedly soar in the next decades. The Covid 19 pandemic crisis has seen to that. Even though the research project (part of which the study presented here) was initiated before the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic, it will join this trend and hopefully will provide insights into the attitudes university students manifest towards digital instruments used in the teaching and learning of English medium language and literature related classes.

Additionally, the concern with investigating attitudes towards digital competence development of students in the field of humanities is closely linked to the new demands of the job market. On the one hand, since one of the professions that is sought by this particular group under investigation is teaching, or more loosely, the field of education, we consider it necessary to discuss the possible changes of attitudes of future teachers/educators, who have been exposed during teacher training to concepts and strategies for the use of technology in teaching, rather as an optional course of action so far, and who may or operate a transfer of learning so as to benefit in their future careers from the lessons learnt in their capacity as students.

Moreover, recent studies (Nesta and Pearson 2017) highlight the importance of the skills in the field of education and training for future jobs, ranking these as top six in the US and top thirteen in the UK, while, in the same countries, learning strategies (the selection and use of appropriate strategies and methods for learning and teaching new things) are among the four most important skills for future jobs. Yet, the context in which these learning skills develop is a highly technological one, not just because of the present situation, but because technology is one of the main drivers of change in the demand for skills in the future (Jones et al. 2020, OECD 2019, Davies et al. 2011), the European framework for lifelong learning skills (European Commission 2018) including digital competence among the key sub-competences.

2. Digital Competence

A first important clarification must be made here concerning the understanding of the concept of competence development – this involves more than gaining knowledge, it seeks

improvement at three levels: knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (EC 2018), of which the last component is mostly under investigation in the present research. The recommendations of the European Commission for the key competences for lifelong learning define the component of attitude as “disposition and mind-sets to act or react to ideas, persons or situations” (2018:7). At the same time, in an effort to prepare countries for the educational demands of the future, the 2019 OECD Future of education and skills 2030 research project designed a learning compass, which consists of seven elements: relying on a set of *core foundations* (which comprise digital literacy), the 2030 competencies include further extensions of the components of *knowledge, skills, attitudes and values* that function in the context of three *transformative competencies* for learners: “creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility” (OECD 2019:16), while *student agency* and the *Anticipation-Action-Reflection learning cycle* play key roles in shaping learning outcomes.

Since teaching and learning unfolds at present in the context of a digital revolution and of accelerated technological change, the pressure on educational systems to make significant changes and on individuals to see digital competence formation as imperative cannot be overlooked. On the one hand, relying on the same lifelong learning competency framework (EC 2018:23), digital competence is further defined in reference to other studies and research (OECD Key competences, WEF 21st Century Skills, P21 Partnership for 21st century) as the “ability to use technology interactively”, “ICT literacy” or “Information literacy, Media Literacy, ICT Literacy”. Moreover, Vuorikari et al. (2016) have delineated and clarified the five competence areas of *digital competence* in the Digcomp 2.0 framework that they put forth. Their research revealed that the main sub-competence areas are information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety (protection of data, devices, environment, personal data, etc.) and problem solving (concerning technical issues). Vuorikari et al. (2016) also clarify the difference between the initial view of what constitutes digital competence (the 1.0 version) and the present situation (the 2.0 version).

Lastly, concerning the participants’ level of digital competence it must be stated that it should be rather high, as our participants belong to a group that should be quite familiar with technology. According to age (27% in their 20s, 21.3% being 21, and 16.4% being 19) the participants in this research belong to generation Y, or the Millennials, who follow Netgeners, who already grew up surrounded by technology (Tapscott 2008). Prensky (2001) refers to the larger group of students in school in 2000 as “Digital natives”, who, in terms of operating with technology, oppose the category of “digital immigrants”, for the first group of users, students for whom technology is not *foreign*.

3. Attitudes

It is well-known that attitudes constitute an important part of our lives, however they do play a vital role when it comes to learning in general and language learning in particular. It has become common knowledge that students having positive attitudes towards themselves, their learning abilities, teachers, subject matters, activities, evaluation, and so on, are capable of minimising failure. Positive attitudes help learners contain and compartmentalise obstacles and move on. As such, arguing in favour of considering attitudes as a determining factor in shaping success when it comes to learning should not be regarded as far-fetched and in need of strong supporting evidence.

Defining attitudes is a less straightforward endeavour. Scholars do not seem to agree on a common, generally accepted definition. For example, Gardner (1980) conceptualizes attitudes as feelings, he argues that attitudes are “the sum total of a man’s instincts and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic” (Gardner 1980:267). Wenden (1991) thinks that attitudes are made up of three factors:

cognitive, evaluative and behavioural, while Baker (1992) sees attitudes as persistent behaviour. For Statt (2003:10), attitudes are “a stable, long-lasting, learned predisposition to respond to certain things in a certain way. The concept has a cognitive (belief) aspect, an affective (feeling) aspect, and a conative (intention) aspect”. By contrast, McKenzie-Mohr (2010) believes that attitudes are just a matter of evaluation.

Even though, as instantiated above, unfolding the nature of attitudes and producing an operationalizable definition may be a hard nut to crack, the thing the scholars do agree upon is that, as McKenzie-Mohr (2010:19) correctly argues, attitudes cannot be observed directly but they can be “inferred from observable responses”. Ultimately, it is the way in which these “observable responses” are conceptualised and formulated, as well as the object towards which attitudes are manifested have to be accounted for.

4. Questionnaire Design and Evaluation

Questionnaires are, perhaps, one of the most used (and abused) instruments of data collection in applied linguistics. At least when it comes to the survey as a research method, questionnaires are definitely and by far the most popular instruments serving the main purpose of measuring something. As Dornyei (2010:5) observes, “questionnaires can yield three types of data about the respondent: *factual*, *behavioral*, and *attitudinal*”. Since they typically elicit responses to by and large close-ended questions formulated in the frame of mind of the researcher, the design of a workable, valid, and reliable questionnaire is rather complex and time-consuming. As such, after deciding on the purpose of the questionnaire, a researcher not only has to decide on the strategy of administration, but also has to check the question wording of the questions, to make sure that the questionnaire measures what it sets out to measure (in research terms known as content and construct validity). In other words, a questionnaire-based study has to take into account that an evaluation stage is as important as the design and administration stage. According to Willis (2020:6), questionnaire evaluation should

(...) variably take into account (i) the investigators (in terms of their measurement objectives), (ii) the survey questionnaire, (iii) the interviewer, and (iv) the respondent; as well as (v) the overall environmental and cultural context (...)

Since the administration of the questionnaire relied on a self-completion, google form questionnaire distributed through various online channels (such as Facebook or email link), the interviewer factor was eliminated, the questionnaire was evaluated in terms of objectives, question wording, and by taking into account the respondent profile as well the context of the study.

5. The Study

As mentioned before, the questionnaire was distributed online and targeted the students majoring in or attending an English as a medium of instruction study programme, at all Bologna levels existing in the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology in our university: BA, MA and PhD, Languages and Literatures and Applied Modern Languages – BA level, Translation Studies and American Studies – MA level, and Philology – PhD level.

Before uploading and distributing the link to the questionnaire made up of both factual and attitudinal close-ended questions and a very few open-ended questions was trialled for question wording and amendments were made according to the comments received. The final form was then uploaded with the accompanying cover letter assuring the respondents of the confidential and volunteer nature of their answers. The questionnaire was addressed to the entire

population frame, amounting to 642 students. 121 students from all levels of study targeted completed the questionnaire (1 was a trial response), the response rate being rather low, near 19%, though understandable when considering the channel of administration.

5.1. Results of the study

The participants to the research represent all the levels of study: BA level first year 18%, BA level second year 30.3%, BA level third year 26.2%, MA students 19.6% and PhD candidates 5.7%. Moreover, the participants are mostly female (82%), which is also illustrative of the higher preference of women for this field and professions related to humanities. The participants are individuals who have studied English language for over 8 years (89.4 %).

Furthermore, the answers to the close-ended question five (Do you use any of the following gadgets in your everyday life? You may tick more than one option) related to the typically used pieces of technology emphasise the appurtenance of the respondents to the *digital native* group; the students claiming to make use of digital equipment varying from smartphone to gadgets typical for gaming (Nintendo Switch, PS4, PS5, PlayStation) or even an interactive online whiteboard.

The participants are aware of their digital skills as the majority (77%) described themselves as digitally literate in response to the close-ended question – “Do you consider yourself digitally literate?” (see pie chart below). Digital literacy is defined in the Digcomp 2.0 framework (Vuorikari et al. 2016:8) as having the knowledge and skills to browse, search and filter data, information and digital content, that is having the competence to “articulate information needs, to search for data, information and content in digital environments, to access them and to navigate between them, to create and update personal search strategies”, the skills and abilities to evaluate data, information and digital content (“to analyse, compare and critically evaluate the credibility and reliability of sources of data, information and digital content, to analyse, interpret and critically evaluate the data, information and digital content”) and to manage data, information and digital content. It must be pointed out here that 15.6 % of the students do not consider themselves digitally literate, which is not confirmed by the next question where students had to evaluate their digital competence on a scale of one to five (five being the highest) and only 5.7% evaluated themselves with a 2 out of 5, nobody choosing 1. Again the majority assessed their digital competence with marks of 4 out of 5 (44.3%), or 5 out of 5 (27%), the remaining 23% choosing an average level of 3 out of 5.

Do you consider yourself digitally literate?

122 de răspunsuri

The responses to the open-ended question “Do you have any favourite apps on your phone/computer? (If your answer is yes, please enumerate the 5-6 most frequently used ones.)” reflected on the one hand the predominance of social media apps (Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Messenger, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, or more rarely Reddit, Discord, Skype). The next category of preferred apps was of those used for entertainment such as Youtube, TikTok, Netflix, even more controversial ones like Spotify, or rarely Shazam, Deezer (apps to enjoy music and/or videos), Pinterest (photography, crafts, design, etc.), Epub Reader, Goodreads, ReadEra (reading), Krita (for drawing), Lightroom (photography), or those used for gaming – Steam, Amongus, Minecraft or unspecified. In terms of apps used for field specific activities, fewer were mentioned – Duolingo, Babel (language learning app), Reverso (translation) or Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, Moodle for classes.

When answering the close-ended question: “In terms of technology use in your personal life has anything changed if you compare your life now to the same period of last year (or before the pandemic breakout)?” many of the respondents consider that they use technology to a greater extent (53.3% of the students questioned identified a change), while for some (36.9% claim) there is no difference.

Has your attitude (feelings, views) towards the use of technology in your personal life changed if you compare your life now to the same period of last year (or before the pandemic breakout)?

122 de răspunsuri

In terms of the open-ended question that followed to justify their response concerning the increase of technology use, answers varied from brief and simple ones to complex and profound ones. See the two illustrative answers below.

I use a computer now, and last year I didn't have one.

Yes, I spend way more time in front of a screen than I used to. Last year I only got headaches from my PS4, but now my laptop has become the primary cause of these headaches. I just want to mention that it

was a simple second hand laptop that I have purchased to do my homework and to browse the Internet while I was in my dorm. But now I have to rely 100% on it, from homework, exams, "interaction" with my colleagues and teachers, volunteering, research and even jobs. I think that it is funny that I have accomplished more things in my room than I did while I was at the University. I do not want to brag, I just want to point out that I've completed two volunteering projects, three research ones and I've managed to get two part-time jobs plus an internship, all from my desk, without having to leave my room. We all are turning into hikikomoris, please look this word up on Google, you will find some interesting articles. I think that hikikomori perfectly describes our current situation, you will see what I mean. Other than my laptop, I think that I actually use my phone less, I didn't play on the PS4 that much because I am too busy, I barely watched TV... the laptop is the sine qua non tool nowadays, that is why their prices have increased considerably.

This rather striking difference is very likely to reside in the age difference and degree of maturity of the respondents. However, the computer analysis of the google form made such correlations nearly impossible and this represents a serious drawback when resorting to such analyses.

The effect of this increased exposure to technology triggered balanced consequences which were of a twofold nature: much more time consuming and exhausting, beneficial on the other hand. Below there's a quote illustrating this find.

I feel like I already had a clear boundary before the pandemic regarding the use of technology. The pandemic did not affect me in any way as I am mostly an introvert and have plenty of other indoor non-PC-related hobbies. My attitude has not changed but as a side note I would like longer breaks between classes. Being an MA student and having 4 classes one after the other leaves me with little time to do anything (go to the bathroom, stretch, eat lunch) and I am usually spent after a whole day of courses. My eyes also hurt if I spend too much in front of the pc so I usually just go to sleep as I can't do much else after a day like that.

There are also isolated responses which bring into discussion the necessity for longer breaks during classes, or highlight the difficulty in keeping up with the class due to repeated technological failure.

There were not many respondents who took a positive view on the *prolonged* use of computer related technology, yet, those that did, mentioned something similar to "Drastic improvement of my digital competence". See another illustrative quote in this respect:

A lot has changed. I've never used Zoom or Google Meet before this pandemic. I've also developed my PowerPoint presentation skills. I've acquired new tools (better headphones, a new microphone, etc.) to make life a bit easier for online classes. I've found multiple apps that help with my dissertation and general organization for classes.

As can be noticed in the example above, there are positive outcomes of the increased use of technology which include: "I use the technology more often and sometimes this helps me save time and energy", "I was able to catch up what I've missed at classes and even be present at the classes", "I was forced to teach using my computer (I sometimes help children who do not have other option, but me :)", "I consider myself more skilled regarding technology. I learned how to use a lot of apps and also that technology can really be useful for school", "because I see now, that it can be useful for research and learning, not only for entertainment".

This difference in the reaction towards *prolonged* use of technology for learning is also reflected in different resolutions that impact free-time activities. Some claimed that the long hours of working for school made them give up on other past-times involving technology "other than my laptop, I think that I actually use my phone less, I didn't play on the PS4 that much because I am too busy, I barely watched TV", while for others it had the opposite effect: "I feel like I spend more time on social media platforms and watching TV than before the pandemic".

As seen, most respondents mention using the computer more extensively than before the outbreak, the most frequently given reason is online classes, both attended and taught the second being social distancing which leave no other choice for interaction. The following example instantiates both reasons.

I feel like I spend more time on social media platforms and watching TV than before the pandemic. I used to go out and take long walks before the COVID, but now it is not that safe and I spend more time inside the house. Also, I spend 80% I think more time in front of my laptop because of the online courses.

An expansion of the open-ended question discussed above was put forth in the open-ended question (“Justify your answer”) subsequent to the close-ended question: “Has your attitude (feelings, views) towards the use of technology in your personal life changed if you compare your life now to the same period of last year (or before the pandemic breakout)?”

Though in different proportions, as seen in the close-ended question, in their open-ended justifications given, the respondents refer to the three possible answers to this question. See the following quotes exemplifying changing, as well as non-changing attitudes:

My attitude changed in the sense that now I can see more clearly that people cannot function without the use of technology and that many people didn’t even notice how important it is to have the bare minimum knowledge in terms of dealing with network problems and other tech related stuff.

My attitude has not changed. I think that technology is a tool and therefore not inherently good or evil, we give it its power. The most important part is not getting absorbed into it *unwillingly* (such as through social media conditioning and all these apps that are made to feel rewarding but don't actually give you anything, getting you stuck in a loop without realizing it).

The following quote, nonetheless, is noteworthy, as it is rather ambiguous in terms of (non) changing attitudes. It may be that the person checked the “I don’t know” option, or a changing attitude, but probably seeing it as being for the worse.

I now value, cherish human interaction way more. Telling jokes, gossiping, sharing things with your colleagues, eating together, partying, checking out a girl are things that technology can't replace. Everything is dead and fake on the Internet. Truth be told, I can't even find a girlfriend with this whole online thing and that really sucks.

As for the reasons given, most of the reasons refer to the indispensable nature of the use of technology these days.

I'm not sure about my feelings towards the use of technology, because it became a bit addictive for us humans and I don't know if we could live without it at this point. I hate that and I know it's bad for our physical and mental health, but all this use is needed.

As expected, all the students mention the quite extensive use of technology, of various sorts, the given reasons are best summarized in the following words of a respondent:

I don't think I would be able to do any kind of research without technology, so that means I wouldn't be able to ever graduate. Also, communication is done 95% (a personal approximation) throughout technology, so that's also very important.

All in all, whether the respondents like it or not, whether their attitudes towards the use of technology, both in their students’ lives, or to a lesser degree in their teachers’ lives, most see it as representing the future and thus becoming unavoidable.

6. Conclusion

Although the study will be further extended to cover other directions concerning the use of technology for learning and teaching purposes, employing other instruments for data collection besides the questionnaire (for eliciting data beyond attitudes), in this paper we only focused on possible changes in attitudes related to the use of technology, which revealed both expected and serendipitous findings.

The participants in the research belong to a group which is at least in theory expected to be *digitally native*, that is, to experience ease in working with technology, no or little frustration; yet, many of the answers pointed out the fact that the extent of usage of technology has only recently increased at a more significant level due to the online educational context. Moreover, although a much more easily attainable competence for a group of individuals born into a digital age, digital competence development takes more than exposure to a favourable context; it involves a deliberate choice to develop skills, to gain knowledge about the use of technology and also to develop a positive attitude concerning technology. For many philology students the importance of digital literacy, the use of technology and the development of these skills was not as clear before switching to an exclusively online teaching/learning environment. Yet, the considerable number of people who claim that not much has changed (30.7% of the total number of respondents) may be indicative of the appurtenance of this group to the digital native category, for whom exclusive online learning did not bring about a significant change.

The negative attitudes concern mostly the physical effects of the increased online activity and are the result of a series of factors, of which exclusive reliance on technology is only one. However, an important finding is the considerable number of positive outcomes identified, which involve the development of new skills, increased familiarity with gadgets and tools, as well as an understanding of the importance of digital skills in today's society, which are all digital competence components that make graduates in the field of humanities better equipped for future jobs.

In other words, there is evidence that digital literacy and data literacy – two of the core foundations for the 2030 competencies according to OECD – take centre stage, and that the almost prophetic claim of the 2019 study slowly becomes reality:

Living in a digitalised world requires reconciling tensions, such as the paradox of an increasingly interconnected world, on the one hand, and the rise of social isolation on the other, or the emergence of a “post-truth” culture in an era of a nearly limitless number and scope of media sources. (OECD 2019:49-50)

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