

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL

ROLUL INSTRUMENTELOR DIGITALE ÎN PROMOVAREA AUTONOMIEI ELEVILOR ÎN ÎNVĂȚAREA LIMBII ENGLEZE CA LIMBĂ STRĂINĂ

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Abstract: *This paper addresses the role of digital tools in promoting student autonomy in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). In the context of contemporary education, digital resources represent a fundamental priority in everyday life, having a positive impact on school success. The present research deals with digital tools as a wide range of educational platforms and applications in teaching, learning, and assessment activities. The methodology used includes analysing specialised literature and applying the questionnaire among teachers from the regions of the Republic of Moldova and Romania. The results obtained indicate that one of the most significant digital resources in developing autonomy outside the classroom is the Kahoot! platform. The employment of digital tools during English classes is very frequently in educational institutions. Digital resources contribute to the active participation of students, the development of critical thinking and the encouragement of learning and written expression among students. The study's conclusions highlight the importance of integrating multiple digital platforms to create a learning environment adapted to the students' needs in modern society. Thus, teachers are motivated to implement multiple digital tools to learn students' opinions, identify difficulties, and adapt teaching platforms for students.*

Keywords: *education, digital tools, learner autonomy*

Rezumat: *Prezenta teză abordează rolul instrumentelor digitale în promovarea autonomiei elevilor în procesul de învățare a limbii engleze ca limbă străină. În contextul educației contemporane, resursele digitale reprezintă o prioritate fundamentală în viața de zi cu zi, având un impact pozitiv asupra succesului școlar. Prezenta cercetare tratează instrumentele digitale ca o gamă largă de platforme și aplicații educaționale în activitățile de predare, învățare și evaluare. Metodologia utilizată include analiza literaturii de specialitate și aplicarea chestionarului în cadrul profesorilor din regiunile Republicii Moldova și României. Rezultatele obținute indică faptul că una dintre cele mai semnificative resurse digitale în dezvoltarea autonomiei în afara sălii de clasă reprezintă platforma Kahoot!. Utilizarea instrumentelor digitale în timpul orelor de limba engleză este foarte frecventă în instituțiile de învățământ. Resursele digitale contribuie la participarea activă a elevilor, la dezvoltarea gândirii critice și la încurajarea învățării și a exprimării scrise în rândul elevilor. Concluziile studiului subliniază importanța integrării mai multor platforme digitale pentru a crea un mediu de învățare adaptat nevoilor elevilor în societatea modernă. Astfel, profesorii sunt motivați să implementeze multiple instrumente digitale pentru a afla opiniile elevilor, a identifica dificultățile și a adapta platformele de predare pentru elevi.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *educație, instrumente digitale, autonomia elevului*

Digital tools are a pillar in modern education because they influence how students learn and communicate with each other. They are online resources such as computer systems, applications, plugins, extensions, and websites that enable human beings to easily accomplish multiple tasks and learners to conduct an in-depth analysis of specialised literature and master the skills they need. At the same time, digital applications help students to gain a thorough understanding of the chosen field.

Nowadays, digital tools have radically changed the way of teaching and learning. One of the most important aspects is that digital resources have the potential to develop the students' learning experience and prepare them for the future. Moreover, they contribute to improving access to knowledge and information, allowing students to use online libraries and video tutorials.

The use of digital resources has both advantages and disadvantages. First of all, they offer constant access to information, which can be easily obtained via phones, tablets, computers, etc. Digital tools such as Google Classroom and Google Forms are free and frequently employed by teachers in the educational environment. Additionally, the implementation of digital resources helps students learn individually. The disadvantages of digital tools are that some platforms prevent access to shared materials, affect the continuity of activities and collaboration between students, require an account for access, and pose security and privacy concerns.

There are many types of tools for teaching, learning, and assessment. The most popular digital resources for teaching and learning are Google Classroom and Padlet, but for student assessment – Google Forms, Kahoot!, and Mentimeter. An example with educational value in interactive teaching is Mentimeter – a free online platform designed to engage students in small groups through accelerated learning activities, brainstorming, short tasks, and student feedback. It is used with high frequency for interactive activities, for progressive monitoring of learning, and the provision of pedagogical feedback responses at the time of development. Mentimeter offers students the opportunity to individually respond, analyse and learn in an attractive way, being a modern platform that contributes to the learning process in a useful and independent way. At the same time, it motivates students to actively participate, becoming a competition, who reacts faster. Independent learning prepares students for the real world, to solve problems, to become responsible and prepared for life.

The purpose of the research is to examine the views of students and teachers on the employment of digital tools in the instructional process, as well as to highlight their contribution in the evolution of students' competencies. To this end, a survey was conducted, using two questionnaires, administered to two different groups of participants directly involved in the teaching-learning process, namely students and teachers. A number of 333 students aged between 12 and 19 years, studying at Mihai Eminescu Theoretical High School, Ioan Vodă Theoretical High School and the Vocational School No. 2 in Cahul municipality, participated in the survey. The sample consisted of both male and female students with different levels of education (gymnasium, high school and vocational education). The second group of participants comprised 28 English language teachers from various educational institutions in the Republic of Moldova and Romania.

The students who responded to the questionnaire showed a great interest in online platforms. They consider that the key feature of digital tools is their ability to support students' learning mainly through interactive activities. From their point of view, videos (38.1%) and interactive activities (33.9%) are the most effective types of digital content in learning English. In their opinion, Kahoot! is the most widely used and interactive digital platform in English lessons. They reported that online quizzes moderately help them to assess their learning progress. Padlet is viewed as the easiest and most effective digital tool

used independently outside the school environment. As a general rule, students have greater access to digital learning resources at home. When they do not understand something, they usually search independently online.

According to about a half of the teachers who participated in the survey, students always or often complete tasks independently using digital tools in the classroom. 37.5% of the teachers indicated that students sometimes employ online platforms to do individual tasks in the classroom. When students work individually, the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning, who directs for autonomous learning. Furthermore, digital feedback provided by the teacher is more effective than traditional feedback because students receive quick responses, and the information is stored online and can be reviewed at any time, favouring the educational process. Students perceive teacher's comments (37.5%) and grades (31.5%) as the main types of online feedback.

Finally, the application of digital resources contributes to the development of digital skills, such as technological competences, virtual interaction, critical thinking and autonomous learning. Therefore, students are more involved and motivated in the educational process, having the opportunity to interact participatively with the content and to develop their verbal communication skills through virtual interactivity.

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