

III. PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING. DISTANCE LEARNING IN HUMANISTIES

LIVING AND LEARNING: BLENDING KEY COMPETENCES WITH FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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***Abstract:** This article aims at emphasizing the necessity of including competences for lifelong learning in education at any stage and indicates the role of e-learning in this process. The author concentrates on how e-learning facilitates the development of key competences as part of academic education, particularly English language learning. The focus will be on the results of the research conducted by the author in the area of CALL among university students in recent years.*

Keywords: CALL, Moodle, foreign language learning, key competences, communicative language competence

INTRODUCTION

“You live and learn” is an often heard reflection made by someone who has just discovered or learned something new. The phrase expresses the person’s surprise at the effect of the learning process or discovery. But the expression reflects one unsurprising nature of our life: we never seem to cease learning. In fact we encounter numerous obstacles on our way to knowledge, of which we are painfully aware as we sometimes get a bit disheartened, lazy or perhaps incapable of making another intellectual effort. Indeed, it takes a lot of skill and right attitude to enjoy learning throughout life, especially when we want to stand its pace.

1. KEY COMPETENCES IN EDUCATION

1.1 Let's blend it: learning outcomes including key competences

The area of developing key competences in education, and in particular in language learning, has been highlighted in recent years (Gadomska and Krajka 2012, Kalamarz 2011, 2012). Various reports and studies signal graduates' serious deficiencies in the scope of specific competences, predominantly personal competences (Osiński 2010, Szerłağ 2009). Hopefully, academic teaching which has been undergoing serious reconstruction recently, will have to resort to many pedagogical and didactic innovations in order to stand the test of turbulent times (Piasecka 2009, Osinski 2010, Marszałek 2010) or even withstand the avalanche of competitive online education (Warell 2013). A clear prompt seems to be including in the teaching process focus on some vital competences, so aptly collected by the Council of Europe in a catalogue of eight key competences: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. (Recommendation 2006) What makes them key competences is the fact that they are needed by every individual in order to enjoy self-realisation and personal development, assume an active, civic attitude, achieve social integration and find employment. Starting from the early stages of education and training young people should have enough key competences to prepare themselves for their adult life. This is not a dead end process – key competences should be further developed, maintained and updated within lifelong learning.

1.2 Why computer assisted language learning?

Technology in language learning and teaching has been at stake for decades. Since the early 1980s it has functioned as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), which later on came to include the use of the Internet and web-based tools. The possibilities that ICT offered shifted language teaching to vast possibilities embraced in one term - Technology Enhanced Language Learning. The rapid development of ICT has accelerated the advent of more user-friendly tools and software. Nowadays the computer in language learning and teaching has become nearly invisible, which only proved Steven Bax's prediction of its full integration into the learning process made in 2003 (Bax 2003). Analysing the distinct stages of the development of computer assisted language learning Jarosław Krajka (Krajka 2012) believes that present day CALL, marked by internet technologies and social media, should reflect primarily both the communicative and integrative aspects, not disregarding, however, tasks in the spirit of behaviourism.

What largely contributed to the contemporary CALL is Web 2.0 technologies, which brought out its practical aspect. They triggered off democratization and openness, facilitated co-authoring of applications and helped network communities emerge. There appeared some new instruments enormously facilitating communication,

collaboration, community building, searching and storing information. They include such tools as wiki, blogs, online whiteboard, social bookmarking, video conferencing and others.

From the pedagogical point of view computers in education are justified in many theories ranging from the behavioural theory, through humanistic, to the constructivist theory (Huk 2008) and other contemporary threads such as connectivism (Smyrnova-Trybulska 2012). Guided by the recommendation of complementarity of different concepts of education the contemporary teacher can find its practical application in Virtual Learning Environments where different theoretical conceptions meet to the advantage of the learner. The blended learning mode allows for combining whatever works well for the students in the teacher’s pedagogical practice (Kossakowska-Pisarek 2009). This mode creates many possibilities of implementing computer-mediated collaboration in a natural way. With their flexibility and facilitating effect Virtual Learning Environments, such as the Moodle platform create opportunity for introducing many aspects of CMC methods (Smyrnova-Trybulska 2009b).

1.3 Moodle – a perfect blender

How to integrate the focus on developing key competences during language learning classes? Bearing in mind a wide range of benefits of using ICT for the purpose of enhancing the development of particular language skills (Krajka 2007) and considering the powerhouse of blended learning ideas (Sharma and Barret 2009) the posed question can be tackled positively. This can be illustrated by the present author’s e-learning course *English for Law* for law students successfully incorporated in the author’s academic ELT practice. In the e-course prominence was given to the development of abilities in various language skills and activities in the scope provided by the possibilities of the Moodle platform. The e-course integrated with the traditional classes allowed for achieving promising teaching results especially as they went beyond developing only a foreign language competence. With the holistic approach taken the results corresponded with the developing of other key competences, especially learning to learn. Table 1 shows the relevance of one example of the author’s e-course activities with key competence oriented e-learning supported language learning.

Table 1.

Relevance of key competences in CALL activities (an example from the author’s e-course “English for Law” at <http://el2.us.edu.pl/spnjo>)

Example of activity	<p><i>You be the judge</i></p> <p>SS split into groups, choose one case to consider by each group, study the facts of the case from the online service ybtj.gov.co.uk, then decide to role-play either the counsel for the defence or prosecution and consequently each group member prepares notes for their court battle and records their argument online; they can draw to other students’ recordings</p>
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		and notes to prepare for the court battle in class. SS can also find useful some quizzes, activities and materials accompanying the main activity, for example <i>Quiz Case collocations Lesson Trial</i> , <i>Hot Potato Crossword People in the Court</i> , etc.	
ICT involved		Moodle: Nanogong voice recorder, Nanogong online editor, Nanogong audio files, Chatroom, links to internet services, other Moodle functionalities. Other: Java, Skype, headset and microphone.	
Key competence involved	Communicating in foreign language	Listening	✓ SS watch and listen to case files; SS listen to other students' audio files.
		Reading	✓ SS read facts of the case; SS read other students notes
		Writing (production)	✓ SS write their notes
		Writing (interaction)	✓ SS exchange information and ideas by means of chatroom
		Speaking (production)	✓ SS record their talk
		Speaking (interaction)	✓ SS interact in class and (or) talk to each other via Skype
	Digital competence	✓ SS open interactive external online services, install and use Java, fix and use their headset and microphone properly, make the most of the online editor, instant messenger, chatroom, Skype and other Moodle functionalities.	
	Learning to learn	✓ SS manage their time, set their individual learning goals, motivate themselves (and each other), search for useful information, get enough individual extra language practice in order to deliver the task effectively; SS exchange information with other students and consult their tutor (and/or other SS).	
	Social and civic competences	✓ SS are aware of basic concepts relating to individuals, groups, gender equality, non-discrimination, society and culture; SS develop their sense of justice; SS communicate constructively in different environments; SS express and understand different viewpoints; SS show tolerance and are prepared to overcome prejudices and to compromise.	
Cultural	✓ SS have an understanding of the cultural and linguistic		

	awareness and expression	diversity; SS work out ways of transferring their creative skills to a professional context
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Source: own work

The above mentioned activity is exemplified in Figure 1 below illustrating the teacher’s perspective of the task. The component used (Nanogong Voices) offers many possibilities of application in the area of interaction: student ↔ teacher, student ↔ student(s), student ↔ tool.

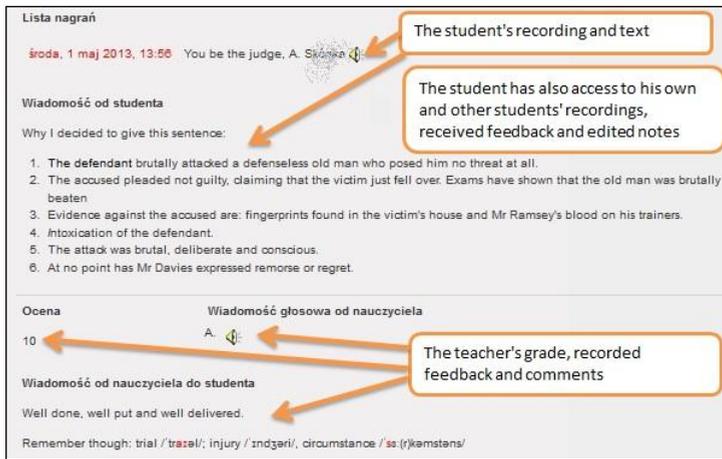


Figure 1. Sample of the activity *You be the judge* from the e-course *English for Law* Source: <http://el2.us.edu.pl/spnjo/mod/nanogong>

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY

2.1 Stages of the Research

The area of developing key competences in academic teaching with the support of e-learning requires empirical study. The author posed several research questions and embarked on research carried out in three stages, including a natural pedagogical experiment during the academic year 2011/2012 continuing in subsequent years. Table 2 shows how the research proceeded.

Table 2.

Stages of the author’s research

Stage 1. Analysis	Study of literature, reports, documents and results of research on the use of e-learning in language learning, graduates` level of competences; analysis of ICT tools (LMS systems) for CALL	Experience in e-learning course authoring (General English courses A2 – B1)	Experience in conducting e-learning courses as part of university programmes
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<i>Result:</i>	Knowledge of theoretical background of the field of study; knowledge of how ICT tools work; knowledge of the teaching potential of e-learning techniques; formulating research problems.		
Stage 2. Preparation	Surveying the students' reflections on their development of language skills and other achievements and the suitability of using e-learning techniques (mid term survey).	Preparing and conducting an initial version of e-course "English for Law" for law students (ESP B2+). Surveying the students' opinions on the course and its effectiveness.	Experience in implementing competence-oriented tasks, their pedagogical assumptions and verifying their results.
<i>Result:</i>	Formulating the initial line of research; preparation and verification of the research tool; posing research goals.		
Stage 3. Research	Continuing surveying students' reflections on their development of language skills and other achievements and the suitability of using e-learning techniques (final survey); 90 students surveyed.	Preparing an improved version of e-course <i>English for Law</i> for law students (ESP B2) with a survey on its effectiveness.	Preparation of the pedagogical experiment (pretest, posttest, group selection criteria, surveys, observation sheets, statistical tools, other); 100 students involved.
<i>Result:</i>	Formulating research hypotheses; implementation of the experiment; observing and controlling the process of the experiment; analysis of the results, verification of the hypotheses and formulating the conclusions; preparing further study and lines of research.		

Source: own work

2.2 Aims and objectives

The main aim of the research was to develop empirically tried components of innovative methods of foreign language teaching with focus on developing language skills deciding the level of mastery of the second key competence. The methods include systematic use of e-learning techniques. Specific aims of the research included:

- determining the relation of conducting ELT classes as part of university programmes with the use of e-learning platform and Web 2.0 technology and the level of mastery of language skills indicating the level of the key competence of communicating in foreign languages;
- determining the importance of e-learning and Web 2.0 technology in designing a teaching process of competence-oriented university foreign language classes;

- indicating the relevance of conducting foreign language classes with the support of e-learning and Web 2.0 technology and the development of other key competences, such as learning to learn, digital, social, civic, cultural competences;
- establishing the relation between the learner's involvement and active participation in the e-learning course and the effectiveness of the development of communicative language competence.

On the practical side, the research aimed at developing an empirically verified e-learning course aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the teaching process oriented on the development of key competences, as well as other components of the author's ELT system in terms of content, means, methods and forms of instruction. The structure of the e-course was designed according to methodological recommendations. It is hierarchical, module-based and consists of several standard blocks with content treated as the kernel of the course (Smyrnova-Trybulska 2009a, 2012). The course allows the learners to familiarise themselves with some essential areas of professional knowledge with focus on the use of language in context practised in action-based tasks. The students find opportunity to immerse into such topics as legal professions, cases, trials, courts, areas of law, torts, crime, punishment, contracts, business entities, employment, property, tax, constitution and human rights. It is important to note that in the course real communication and expression (set in the professional or semi-professional context) comes first before knowledge of specific legal terms as the freshers quickly come to realise it takes a long winding road to become a lawyer. With this in mind the course concentrates on developing various abilities requiring language skills such as arguing, responding to arguments, advising, analysing, searching for information, reporting, exchanging information, dealing with problems, finding consensus, paraphrasing, etc. The course addresses many real life problems or situations currently discussed and commented for the purpose of ensuring increased engagement on the part of the students and providing real language used in context thanks to internet and media coverage. Hence, reliance on internet sources is remarkable in the course.

2.2 Design and procedure

The experiment was conducted by the present author among a group of over 100 law students learning English for two semesters of their first year of studies at the University of Silesia in the academic year 2011/2012. The students shared a similar level of language competence confirmed by the results of the placement test (B2), the same syllabus which included an ESP component in the area of Legal English and using the Communicative Approach in teaching English as a foreign language. Besides, the admission criteria guaranteed a similar level of intellectual capacities. As part of the experiment the students did the same pretest at the beginning of the term. The test consisted of three parts representing the language skills measured: listening, reading and writing. Each part consisted of varied tasks aimed at bringing out the level of the abilities. The listening part consisted of three tasks requiring the ability of listening for gist, listening for detail and note taking. The reading part was

made up of two tasks testing reading for gist and reading for detail. The writing part involved writing a letter on the basis of necessary information and previous correspondence. The language was suited to the prospective working environment and the tasks involved some professional language required of somebody who wants to start a career in the legal or business profession. The types of tasks, however, represented the range of tasks the students were familiar with studying English in secondary school (multiple choice, true-false question, matching, gap filling, letter writing) so that the form did not hinder their performance. The results were statistically analysed and verified in order to check whether the students come from the same population. With almost normal distribution and equal variances (checked by means of Fisher's test) Student's t-test was applied and as a result the value of t-test of the experiment indicated the statistical insignificance of the difference between the arithmetic means of the results of each part of the pretest in both groups respectively. The result of the statistical analysis confirmed the homogeneity of two of the tested groups and consequently two research groups were selected: control group (27 students) and experimental group (28 students). The former was offered traditional instruction while the latter was taught with the use of a special innovative teaching system including an original e-learning course in legal English as an experimental variable. Both groups were run by the same teacher throughout the experiment. The teaching process was observed, monitored during the eight month period of the experiment, with numerous tests and a survey in both groups and finally the posttest was conducted. Again, the statistical analysis was carried out, which showed that the difference between the average results measured in the independent samples was statistically significant. The results of the experiment indicate that the change measured in the scope of the three skills after the eight months of the teaching process was bigger in the experimental group. The students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group in the progress made in the development of the three language skills. Also, statistical analysis was conducted in the dependent samples: EG and EC. The difference between the arithmetic means of the results of the pretest and the posttest proved to be statistically significant in both groups respectively.

2.3 Results and findings

The language skill developed the most in the EG was writing (an increase of over 10%), while in the CG it was listening (with a 7.40% growth). In the EG the other two developed skills were listening and reading with a 9.75% and 7.75% increase respectively) while in the CG reading (5.87%) came second slightly before writing (5.75%). (Table 3)

The writing task was assessed on the basis of five criteria. Two of them represent linguistic competence: the extent of vocabulary and correct use of grammar. The score in these two criteria was separated for the purpose of analyzing the development of linguistic competence and statistical analysis based of Student's t-test showed there was a considerable advantage of the experiment group compared with the control group (Table 4).

Table 3.

Summary of the research results: comparison of arithmetic average differences between pretests and post-tests

		Difference between arithmetic means of the pretest and posttest results						Lg skills ranking in Groups
		$\bar{d} = \bar{x}_{\text{posttest}} - \bar{x}_{\text{pretest}}$						
		Language skills						
		LISTENING		READING		WRITING		
		Points	Percentage	Points	Percentage	Points	Percentage	
Groups	EG	1.95	9.75%	1.86	7.75%	2.07	10.35%	1. WRITING, 2. LISTENING, 3. READING
	CG	1.48	7.4%	1.41	5.87%	1.15	5.75%	1. LISTENING, 2. READING, 3. WRITING
	$\bar{d}_{EG} - \bar{d}_{CG}$	0.47	2.35%	0.45	1.88%	0.98	4.6%	1. WRITING, 2. LISTENING, 3. READING

Source: own work

Table 4.

Summary of the research results: comparison of arithmetic average results in the scope of linguistic competence

Comparison of the development of linguistic competence (lexis and grammar) in EG and CG							
	Arithmetic mean \bar{x}				Difference between arithmetic means		
	EG		CG				
	points	percentage	points	percentage	$\bar{x}_{EG} - \bar{x}_{CG}$		
pretest	5.9	59%	5.74	57.4%	0.16	1.6%	
posttest	6.57	65.7%	5.78	57.8%	0.79	7.9%	
Difference between arithmetic means of the pretest and posttest results $\bar{d} = \bar{x}_{\text{posttest}} - \bar{x}_{\text{pretest}}$	0.67	6.7%	0.04	0.4%			

Source: own work

The effect of statistical analysis was also confirmed in the experimental group students’ own reflections on the development of particular language skills and the use of e-learning course supporting language learning. Their responses given in the survey conducted at the end of the course are summarised in Table 6.

Additionally, a correlation was found between the EG students’ repeated, purposeful use of each module’s teaching component (Moodle Lesson) and the score of the whole module. The calculated and verified Pearson’s correlation coefficient for the whole course ($r_{xy}=0,82$) shows that the correlation between the students’

involvement and active participation in the e-learning course and the effectiveness of the development of language competence is considerable. (Figure 2)

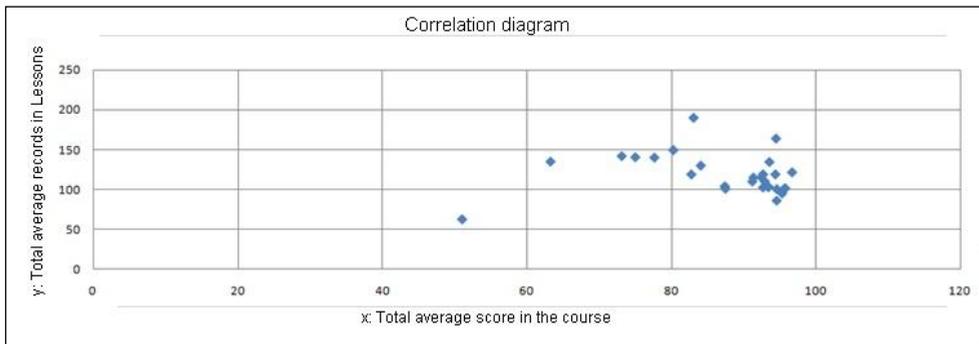


Figure 2. Diagram illustrating a correlation between variables x and y in the EG

Source: own work

2.4 Surveys

In respect of the development of other key competences the results of the survey conducted in both groups show that on average the students participating in the e-learning course discern some progress in their ability to learn (in terms of time management, self-discipline, motivation and awareness of learning objectives) whereas the students from the control group think it is hard to say whether something has changed in this respect except for the ability to search information and use available resources. However, the students gave similar responses reflecting on their digital competence. They could not say exactly if there has been any change in their ability to use computer equipment as well as programs and services. What both groups differed in was being able to communicate by means of internet communication tools – the average response of the experimental group students was that they have noticed some change in this respect, whereas the students in the other group were not so certain about it. (Table 5)

As part of the research the experimental group was surveyed at the beginning and at the end of the experiment in order to find out whether they have experienced any influence of learning English with the use of ICT. In relation to the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of communicative language competence the students tend to notice some progress in their learning process supported by e-learning in the area of grammatical, lexical and spelling correctness, appropriate use of styles, ability to make a speech, conduct a conversation or discussion, being coherent and recognizing diverse texts or messages. What the students emphasise was a considerably wide extent of vocabulary they could learn during the course, but they were not so sure whether there has been any change in their knowledge of correct pronunciation or rules of using appropriate language. (Table 6)

Table 5.

Summary of the survey on students’ reflection on the progress in the development of selected key competences after one year of study

SURVEY: STUDENTS SELF ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCES Questionnaire: What conclusions have you arrived at after two semesters at university?	Responses in Experimental Group					Responses in Control Group				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
	I have noticed considerable progress	I have noticed some progress	Hard to say	I have noticed hardly any progress	I have not noticed any progress at all	I have noticed considerable progress	I have noticed some progress	Hard to say	I have noticed hardly any progress	I have not noticed any progress at all
1. I am an independent learner (I can manage my time and discipline myself)	4	2.39 13	7	4	0	4	8	2.7 9	4	2
2. I am aware of acquired knowledge and skills (I know what I learn and the purpose of learning)	3	2.36 14	9	2	0	5	8	2.67 7	5	2
3. I am curious and eager to learn: acquire new knowledge and improve skills	2	2.46 13	11	2	0	4	7	2.81 8	6	2
4. I am able to search new information and use available resources	11	1.86 12	3	2	0	7	2.19 10	8	2	0
5. I am able to use computer equipment while learning and I feel confident about it.	5	4	3.25 3	11	5	2	4	3.44 7	8	8
6. I am able to use different computer programs and services	4	10	2.71 5	8	1	3	3	3.3 9	7	5
7. I am able to communicate effectively in Polish or English by means of instant messenger, mail, chat, forum, etc	4	2.43 14	6	2	2	5	9	2.63 8	1	4

Source: own work

Table 6.

Summary of the survey of the EG students’ reflection on the progress in the development of language competences after one year of e-learning course supported language learning.

E-learning course supported language learning helped me learn...	I have noticed considerable progress	I have noticed some progress	Hard to say	I have noticed hardly any progress	I have not noticed any progress
	1	2	3	4	5
grammatical correctness		2.46			
lexical correctness		2.43			
correct spelling		2.11			
correct pronunciation			2.79		
an extended range of vocabulary	1.43				
how to use rules of appropriate language			2.56		
how to use different styles		2.32			
how to hold a speech, conversation or discussion		2.46			
how to reach logical and grammatical cohesion		2.39			
how to recognize the type and form of text or message		2.46			

Source: own work

Another reflection the students in the experimental group made was indicating the language skill they could experience progress in while studying: listening, reading and writing as well as interaction were the language activities the students sensed some progress in, they were not so certain in the case of speaking. (Table 7)

Table 7.

Summary of the survey of the EG students' reflection on the progress in the development of language skills after one year of e-learning course supported language learning

E-learning course supported language learning helped me develop language skills in the scope of ...	I have noticed considerable progress	I have noticed some progress	Hard to say	I have noticed hardly any progress	I have not noticed any progress
	1	2	3	4	5
LISTENING: I listen to and understand somebody's talk, messages, instructions, radio and television broadcasts, recordings.		2.43			
READING: I read and understand correspondence, information, argumentation, instructions, I read for general understanding.		2.07			
SPEAKING: I express myself orally, describe my experiences and feelings, present my viewpoint, make a declaration, etc.			2.64		
WRITING: I express myself in a written form, write a text, letter, story, report, essay, study, description, etc.		2.11			
INTERACTION: I understand my partner, talk, take part in a formal and informal discussion, keep correspondence, take part in a chat, take notes, messages, forms, exchange information, hold a conversation for a specific purpose.		2.43			

Source: own work

The other aspect of the surveyed communicative language competence concerned language strategies used in effective communicating, of which planning was the strategy the students used to a considerable extent, and the strategies they used to some extent included using synonyms, correcting, inferring and interpreting, cooperating and engaging in interactions, processing texts. The two strategies they were uncertain about were asking for clarification and taking notes. Seemingly, the e-learning course did not create enough opportunity and need for using them (Table 8)

Table 8.

Summary of the survey of the EG students' reflection on the progress in the effective use of language strategies during their experience with e-learning course supported language learning *Source: own work*

E-learning course supported language learning made me ...	To a considerable extent	To some extent	Hard to say	Hardly ever	Never
	1	2	3	4	5
plan what I wrote or talked about	1,46				
replace words or phrases with synonyms		1,86			
care for correctness and correct my talk or text		1,54			
infer or interpret meanings		1,75			
ask for clarification			2,61		
cooperate and engage in interactions		2,4			
process text		1,86			
take notes			2,79		

Additionally, the repeated surveys allowed to establish which organisational forms of e-learning supported language learning are most effective. The e-course was given 4 out of 5 in terms of being easy to use and student-friendly. The components the students found very useful were lessons, quizzes (including audio/video quizzes), crosswords and games, editing glossary, webquests, written assignments (4/5). Those whose usability was marked 3 out of 5 included oral assignments (Nanogong Voices), forum and chat. The area of organisational forms is undergoing rapid technological change and improvement and it certainly deserves further research.

2.4 Discussion

Having analysed the results of the empirical study it is possible to conclude that supporting the teaching process with appropriate e-learning techniques and Web tools influences positively the development of language skills, and consequently favours the development of the key competence of communicating in foreign languages. The language skill developed the most was writing. The other two skills were listening and reading. These findings are reflected by the students' responses in the survey. Apart from the considerable increase noted in the development of the three language skills, linguistic competence can be maximised when its development is supported by e-learning techniques. One element of this competence: extent of vocabulary was particularly emphasised by the survey respondents. Parallel development was also observed in the case of other key competences, such as digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competence and cultural awareness and expression.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above-mentioned research there is enough ground for ascertaining that supporting foreign language learning with e-learning techniques considerably improves the development of communicative language competence, which manifests itself in the mastery of language skills as well as strictly linguistic aspects of the competence (extent of vocabulary and grammatical correctness) being the exponents of the key competence of communicating in foreign language. The positive results in this respect mark the influence e-learning has on the development of this key competence as well as other key competences. The effectiveness in this respect is enhanced by appropriately selected, methodologically justified methods and techniques of education including the application of e-learning platforms, the use of which is received by students positively within the practice of academic foreign language teaching. It is important to note that using one comprehensive tool such as Moodle allows to maximise the competence-oriented foreign language learning and teaching, which definitely favours lifelong learning.

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