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Role of E-Learning in Improving Quality of Language Learning in Distance Education and Evaluation of its Effectiveness

نقش آموزش الکترونیکی در بهبود یادگیری زبان در نظام آموزش از راه دور و ارزیابی کارایی آن

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درسی زبان خارجی در دانشگاه پیام نور است. تحقیقی در این زمینه انجام شد و از دانشجویان دانشگاه پیام نور خواسته شد که از مواد آموزشی موجود در اینترنت برای بهبود مهارت تلفظ و بیان، ایجاد انگیزه جهت یادگیری، نگرش مثبت و افزایش اعتماد به نفس خود برای بیان و درک مواد یادگیری استفاده کنند.

همچنین، این مقاله به این نکته می پردازد که برای بهبود کیفیت یادگیری، ایجاد فضای آموزش الکترونیکی برای نظام آموزش دانشگاه پیام نور امری بسیار حیاتی و ضروری است.

کلید واژه: آموزش الکترونیکی، فضای یادگیری، آموزش از راه دور، کیفیت یادگیری.

چکیده: به کارگیری تکنولوژی ارتباطات و اطلاعات چهره آموزش و یادگیری را در سرتاسر دنیا دگرگون ساخته است. یادگیری زبان خارجی معمولاً شاخه ای از آموزش است که به طور کلی در ایران و، مخصوصاً، در دانشگاه پیام نور از اهمیت به سزایی برخوردار است. آموزش الکترونیکی یکی از ابزارهای آموزشی جدید و بسیار موثر است که در فراهم ساختن فرصت ها و ایجاد فضای یادگیری تاثیر به سزایی دارد.

استفاده از این ابزار آموزشی و یا مواد آموزشی موجود از طریق کامپیوتر فرصت های زیادی را برای یادگیری برخی از مواد درس در سیستم آموزش از راه دور فراهم می سازد. این نوع آموزش می تواند یک ابزار کمکی مناسب در کنار نظام آموزش حضوری باشد.

هدف از این مطالعه یافتن راهکارها و شناخت موانع استفاده از آموزش الکترونیکی جهت یادگیری و آموزش مواد

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Introduction

The emergence and development of information and communication technologies is changing the face of teaching and learning in distance education. E-learning adds a new dimension for objectives of teaching at higher education through distance education programme.

The distance context for language learning presents learners with new demands and new opportunities compared to those experienced in face – to- face classroom. Language learning in distance education requires more awareness on the part of learners. Awareness about the use of media or computer-aided material, information and communication technologies, e-learning strategies, pedagogical implications of e-learning which will support learners language learning through distance education.

Cynthia White (2003) emphasize that learning space in the distance education context is concerned with developing the ability to engage with, interact with, and participate in particular learning environment, which are not always directly mediated by the teacher. This environment provide immense opportunities for learning some course materials through distance education, which can be a healthy supplement and effective learning material in eliminating some difficulties in the process of comprehension and expression level.

Therefore, computer – assisted language learning facilitate the acquisition of the language by means of exposure. Clark (2000),

points out that computer-assisted learning (online or e-learning) or activities increase the knowledge learned and the satisfaction derived from the process.

The aim of this paper is to explore the benefits and barriers of using e-learning in the teaching and learning of foreign language learning material in PNU. And it also argues that for achieving the quality of learning, adaptation of e-learning to the condition of PNU is essential.

Distance Language Learning

A distance context for language learning presents learners with new demands and new opportunities compared to those experienced in face-to-face classrooms in self-management and environment management (White, 1995 and 1997 a), and are faced with numerous decisions and roles which are usually carried out by the teacher in classroom contexts. These may include decisions about the fit between the target language materials and particular learner needs, how to proceed in the face of confusion or uncertainty and how to make connections between different parts of the course.

The ability of each learner to identify, participate in and manage learning experiences, which match their individual learning needs, is essential to fully benefit from the opportunities available in distance learning White, (2003) believed that the development and exercise of this ability, the hallmark of learner participation in

independent language learning environment, which may be supported by, but not always directly mediated by, language teachers. In particular, learners need to develop awareness of what it means to be a distance language learner and what is required of them (their identity), and what is available to them within the wider learning context as they seek to adjust to a new learning environment.

White. (2005) points out that it is possible to identify four fundamental areas in which a distance language learning context may differ significantly from a face-to-face classroom experience. Firstly, there are the immediate demands of the new context and new conditions for learning which learner need to accommodate to. These include a more isolated study context, facing problems of maintaining initial motivation without the regular scheduling of face-to-face classes and limited access to real-time interactions. Real-time interactions can structure and support the learning process by providing immediate feedback and opportunities to clarify expectations.

Secondly, the teacher is remote from the sites of learning and is not there moment by moment to mediate between the learner and target language sources. The teacher is less available to provide immediate monitoring and feedback or ongoing assistance with developing language skills.

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, a distance language learning context requires more

awareness on the part of learners, as frequently they must oversee the rate and direction of their learning and these functions, ideally, are informed by knowledge of themselves as learners and skills in self-management (White, 1995). Distance learners need to make their own internal adjustments in the process of developing awareness.

And finally there are many issues concerning the new technologies and the kinds of borders learners may be required to cross in accessing new learning spaces.

It is now apparent that as learners start to work within the new learning spaces developed for distance language learning (integrated electronic learning environments, audiographics and online collaborative learning opportunities) they require new kinds of skills, motivation and commitment (Rogers and wolf 2000, Catterick 2001 and Kotter 2001). They need to learn to work with an interconnected community of learners, using a number of new mediums such as text-based online conferencing, and using higher levels of interaction and collaboration than have been possible in earlier paradigms of distance language learning. In addition, in order to make language learning meaningful in their immediate environment they need to learn how to use the affordances of the new technologies in ways that contribute to their developing target language competence.

Learners who enter a distance language

course also identify many new opportunities. The flexibility of access in terms of time and place has long been acknowledged (see Keegon 1990 and Shelly 2000). There is more freedom from input and interactions which are not immediately relevant to individual learning needs (White 1997b).

There is also the possibility of developing skills in self-direction and management of learning experience (Hurd 2004, Weasenforth, Meloni and Biesenbach-Lucas, 2004). In particular, the opportunities for learners to develop a more independent approach to learning a language, together with the requirements for self-management, mean that distance learners are arguably well prepared to take advantage of other independent language learning opportunities.

E-learning and Foreign Language Learning (FLL)

According to (DFES,2005), E-learning strategy website, the definition of E-learning is if someone is learning in a way that uses information and communication technology (ICTs), they are using E- learning .

The E-learning strategy, Harnessing Technology [available from the http://www.dfes.gov.uk/Publications/e-strategy_e-learning, March 2005, accessed on 12/07/06] address how technology can be used to enhance learning. As (P.Suresh, practice –based learning (adoptive) and creative and higher order learning (adaptive). This model has the advantages and resources

2005) mentioned, the influence of the 'E – learning' strategy on the 'Skills for life' strategy, had made 'E-learning' an indispensable part of teaching English language. Whereas the use of E-learning was desirable, now it has become almost mandatory for purpose of inspections.

Since the traditional methods of learning in the era of ICTs seem to be not enough, it is necessary to know why we need to use e-learning, and also to know what the pedagogical implications of e-learning are. Pedagogical consideration justifies using e-learning. "E-pedagogy might broadly be defined as 'Learning design that incorporates educational quality, values and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment activities supported by technology' (Christine Smith), 2004, available from <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/cap/resources/eguides/eskills/pedagogies/>, accessed on 12/7/06.

There is a list of selection and evaluation of e-learning tools, (a) Adoptive- adaptive learning model, (b) Conversational model, and (c) Content – communication- collaboration mode (available from www.warwick.ac.uk, accessed on 12/7/06).

A brief definition of these models follows:

(a) TELRI model is based on distinguishing between two types of learning: knowledge and (Suresh,2005).

(b) Conversational model is based on the assumption that the teacher would have access

to a variety of e-learning tools. Laurillard (1993,2002) [as in Pedagogic models to support the selection and evaluation of e- learning tools, available from www.warwick.ac.uk, accessed on 25/1/05] offers examples of how learning

resources can influence the teaching style(student-centred or teacher-centred).

For example, Table 1 shows the relationship between E-learning tools and the different 'Conversations approaches to teaching:

Table 1: Conversational model and resources

Media Forms	E-learning tools
Narrative	Print, TV, videocassette
Interactive	CD, DVD or web-based resources
Communicative	Web conferencing, asynchronous or synchronous
Adaptive	Manipulability model
Productive	Tools for students to create model or descriptions

Suresh (2005) believes, "Ideally, this model will suit learners in a perfect world, where we can get access to all the resources which we want for teaching".

(c) Content –communication – collaboration model

This model given below is a broad pedagogical model, used at various stages of teaching and learning [as in Pedagogic models to support the selection and evaluation of E-learning tools available, from www.warwick.ac.uk, accessed on 12/7/06].

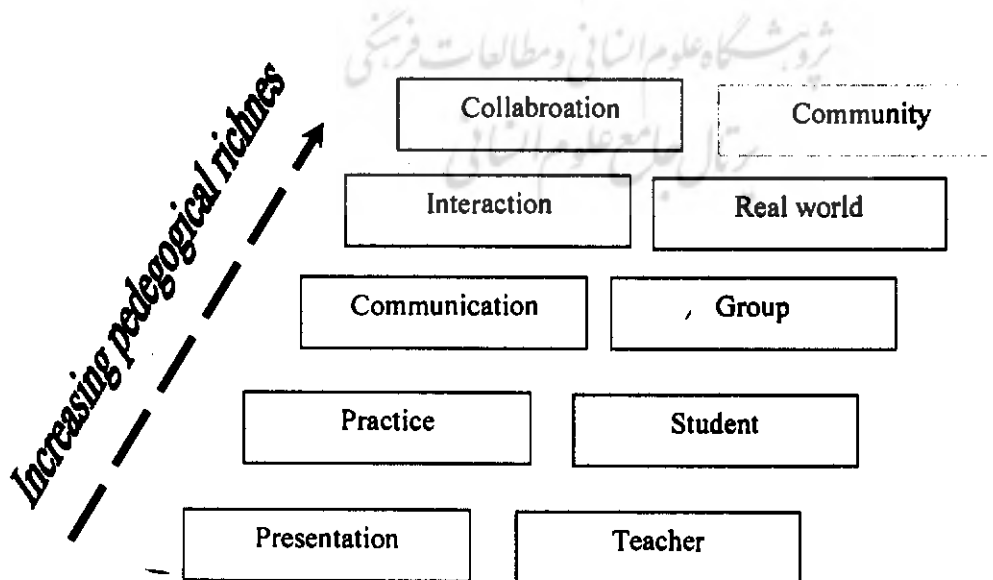


Figure 1: Broad pedagogical model

As can be seen from the above figure, the increasing content – richness leads to increasing pedagogical richness. Suresh (2005), points out that not all learners will be able to progress through all the stages of this model. The objectives of the teaching (which would be based on the needs of the students and the stage of learning) would determine the level to be adopted.

However, it is to be noted that 'pure e-learning would not suit all Foreign Language Learners as they need interaction with peers and teachers to improve their speaking and listening skills. At the same time, if traditional teaching (face-to-face teaching) is integrated with 'E-learning' models, learning could be optimum (Suresh, 2005). In other words, this E-learning model is called blended-learning.

Distance Learning Quality

Distance education institutions need a creative and systematic process. To obtain a continuous improvement of quality (LeBlance, 1985).

In order to enhance educational quality in distance education, the teaching - learning materials, activities, and processes must be focused. Since distance learning happens at a distance from the teaching institute., it is crucial both to provide high quality materials and to support learners' learning throughout the course. Hang (1992) believes that studying the process of

learners' learning is a prerequisite for helping them. It is often difficult to confirm a student's learning progress and whether successful learning has occurred through the materials given.

Various ways have been developed to help students learning in distance teaching institutes. Tutoring is a major organizational support system as seen in most distance teaching situations. In distance learning the tutor, however, is rarely available to provide immediate interaction or communication related to specific contents whenever it is needed, but her/ his role cannot be ignored.

The other organizational support is concerned with students' satisfaction. Students in a distance education system are in the best position to assess the quality of any particular distance education programme. Their judgement of quality are based on their individual needs, demands, desires, and experiences. So learners in distance education should know their learning for exchange of knowledge, ideas, qualifications, or instructional components. Moreover, the specific learning outcomes should match the common global skill and mastery standards (Granger & Gulliver, 1995).

The other organizational support in the new era of distance learning is information and communication technologies (ICT). With the emergence of Internet communication technologies, distance learning experienced a

tremendous change. Research on learning effectiveness and Internet communication technologies has continued with renewed zeal. These facilities create a new learning space which is a combination of both traditional and technology based learning methods.

Therefore, the quality of the learning process must be recognized as a key factor in assessing learning effectiveness. McCollum et al (1995) states that for tutors in distance learning universities, the key to learning effectiveness was seen to lie in the students' understanding of what they had learnt and achievement of what they had set out to do. Other aspects of learning effectiveness include results of assignments and tests.

The most significant measure for learning effectiveness was ultimately the students' examination results. Distance learning can provide an educational environment every bit as demanding as the traditional face- to - face class. Quality resides in the worth of the effort put forth by faculty and students. Students and faculty who experience online teaching and learning report enthusiasm for – and satisfaction with the medium.

E-learning environment will facilitate the emergence of a continuous learning environment, one in which teaching – learning process never ends. (Edelson, p. [http:// www. ignou. ac. in / e-journal/ contents/ edelson. htm](http://www.ignou.ac.in/e-journal/contents/edelson.htm) accessed on 15/07/6) points out the e-learning environment provides a

platform that is compatible with divergent learning styles and inclinations. This feature will promote repeated use and heavy demand and in the long run enhance learning quality.

E-learning Qualities for FLL

E-learning which is a combination of both traditional and technology based learning methods has many qualities and advantages generally for distance learners and particularly for language learners.

E-learning creates interaction that stimulates understanding and the recall of information, when learners exchange questions with others. It fosters self - paced learning whereby learners can learn at the rate they prefer. (Ravi, 2005) believes that providing learner participation in a virtual classroom is activity leading to collaboration learning and learner - centric environment, and self – directed learning.

E-learning allows learner to select learning materials or to be directed to content that meet their level of knowledge, interest and what they need to know to perform more effectively in their particular activity. It encourages the distance learners to browse information through hyperlinks or sites on the World Wide Web and thereby find information relevant to their personal situation.

Also it develops knowledge of Internet that will help learners throughout their careers. And it encourages language learners to take

responsibilities for their learning and enhance knowledge and self-confidence.

The Effectiveness of E-learning in Language Learning

Based on many researches and studies have done on Computer - Assisted Language Learning, it was proved that computers facilitate the acquisition of the Language (by means of exposure), and they are suitable for language learning. CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has been developed during the last three decades, and can be categorized in terms of three phases: a) Behaviouristic CALL, b) Communicative CALL, and c) Integrative CALL. cf. Barson & Debski, in press (Mark Scahuker, 1996, accessed on 12/07/06 available from [http://www.gse.uci.edu/markw/call.html/.](http://www.gse.uci.edu/markw/call.html/))

The Integrative CALL which uses hypremidia', a simulation of real life is the concern of this study. CALL devices have been and are highly successful in teaching languages, more so English (P.Suresh, 2005). According to the LAD (Language Acquisition Device) propounded by the famous linguist, Noam Chomsky (1964) [Walter F. Lockhart. (Dec, 1997, available from <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/6931/krashen.html>, accessed on 12/07/06] says that languages cannot be taught like other subjects. Languages are 'acquired' by our in-built 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD). Language learning is a complex neuro - linguistic

process. Enormous and comprehensible quantities of data should be input to our LAD system for successful acquisition of the language. So immense exposure along with comprehensible exposure leads to successful language acquisition through LAD.

Since computers facilitate the acquisition of the language (by means of exposure), they are good for language learning (P.Suresh, 2005). Although, technology cannot be replaced by an inspirational teacher who has prominent role with regard to the students needs and learning style. Therefore, languages are best learnt through a blended learning approach where elements of e-learning integrative CALL, are embedded within traditional teaching methods.

CALL provides a self-directed learning with little or no intervention from the teacher. This can be enabled by the use of online resources or cd-roms. This kind of learning can be highly useful for reinforcement of language learning, when the learner is unable to attend classes due to various barriers such as family or work commitment.

The Benefits of E-learning for Language Learners

The development in information and communication technology is changing the face of teaching and learning in education in all over the world. There are some E-learning models adopted for the teaching and learning of English

Language Learning even in the English community. The benefits accrued through using e-learning are exponential especially when it is used in a 'blended learning' approach. Traditional teaching still occupies the central stage and is aided by E-learning components (P.Suresh, 2005)

The benefits of E-learning to the learners have been mentioned in the E-strategy website, available from the [http:// www. dfes. gov. uk/ publications /e-strategy](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/e-strategy), accessed on 12/7/06 .According to this E-strategy, learners should have more ways to learn, more subject to choose from, more flexible study, easier ways to try things out, and a personal online learning space.

Motivation, which is one of the most important aspects of affective domain in learning especially in language learning, can be increased through using E-learning modules. (As it was emphasized in What the Research Says About ICT and Motivation, available from [http://ferl.becta.org.uk/ sub site /fpp6 /html /relating-elearning /tt1-analysis 1.htm](http://ferl.becta.org.uk/subsite/fpp6/html/relating-elearning/tt1-analysis1.htm), accessed on 12/7/06.) Interactive E-learning could motivate and involve all learners in their own learning.

Also E-learning has some benefits for the learners and educational institutions:

1. It helps learners to expand their participation by using ICT.
2. It helps learners to develop I.T.skills, which is an important prerequisite aspect of using E-learning, and in the long run increase

the skills level of the future workforce.

3. It helps to achieve greater flexibility of delivery.
4. It engages and motivates all learners.
5. It provides more cost-effective learning.

The barriers of E-learning

It goes without saying that E-learning without the benefit of adequate and timely facilitation may be misguided and ineffective. The observation of using information and communication technology in the form of E-learning suggest many broad issues related to online facilitation have to be addressed to ensure effectiveness of online instruction or E-learning. If these issues are not taken into consideration, they will be as the barriers in the following forms:

- a. Lack of educational media in the form of computer, and other necessary equipment
- b. Lack of essential E - learning space.
- c. An absence of university facilitation
- d. Lack of learners' communicative competence
- e. The server and network capacity needed for large- scale operations are not inexpensive
- f. The payroll costs of instructional developers, graphic artists, and technical support personnel can be considerable.

According to the Guide to E-learning, available from SENET Website (available from:[http://senet.lsc.gov.uk/guide2/elearnbarriers/ index. cfm# barriers](http://senet.lsc.gov.uk/guide2/elearnbarriers/index.cfm#barriers), accessed on 12/07/06), there

are some common barriers for teachers and learners and institutions:

- lack of students access to computer and Internet,
- lack of enough knowledge of the ICT skills of the learner, their learning style, motivation, and the context of the learning situation,
- lack of enough facilities to adopt or develop e-learning in study centers,
- lack of teachers ' I.T.skills and the expense and time involved in updating their skills,
- there is little time for teachers who wish to adopt or develop e-learning due to their time consuming presence in the workplace,
- lack of various hardware and software platforms, used in different institutions, which result to share information,

There are other potential difficulties:

- inadequate models of the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in higher and distance education (e.g., Garrison et. al, 2000),
- ineffective facilitation of learning activities that are based on group communication (e.g. Salmon, 2000),
- inappropriate or ill – defined communicative learning activities (e.g., Marra et.al, 2004).

Methodology

The subjects in this study are Foreign Language Distance Learners registered on PNU course

called Oral Reproduction 1 and 2 in both autumn and spring semester of 2005. The study was done during the face-to-face tutorial by tutor. At the beginning of these semester Foreign Language Learners were encouraged to use resources on the Internet to find short stories or news articles which have voice facilities in order to improve their pronunciation, interest, attitudes and self-confidence for expressing language learning material. The news articles were ranging from social, political, economical, and other specific subject matters.

For this courses students attend 12 to 14 hours of face-to-face tutorial sessions. After finding the invaluable computer- aided materials, they were asked to start discussion and give their presentation on the subject matters in which they were interested in. At the end of the semester they were given questionnaires which consist of 24 questions about their involvement in e-learning and using computer-aided materials. Most of them tried to use café-net for searching and finding the material. The questionnaire is available in Appendix 1.

The questionnaires were collected and studied. The results were obtained. On the basis of the results of open ended questions of questionnaire. The following marking obtained on different aspect of using computer-aided material.

Table 2: Evaluation Results received from Students, Involvement in Computer – Assisted /E- Learning Through Survey Questions:

Category	Description	Marks
High	i. Highly improvement of correct pronunciation; enforce learners to work with computer; make the learners enjoy the subject matter, acquire new information; provide learners with life skills related to computer ii. Show learners interest to do more searching using the internet or (ICT); show learners' satisfaction for using both face – to – face and e-learning (blended learning); lack of access to computer and Internet at the university,	5
Moderate	iii. Improves the quality of pronunciation; it was easy to work with computer; assiste in developing learners confidence in practical work iv. It was fun to work with computer; it was easy to find the subject matter v. Show learners interests for face – to – face tutorial computer aided material (blended – learning) vi. Enhance self-study and online learning;	4 3
Low	vii. Lack of awareness of using educational technology; it was not easy to work with computer; little access to Internet viii, A few knowledge of using I.T skills; a few access to computer	2
None	ix. Interest for working with computer was minimal, x. Few or no contributions	1

The assesment scheme for learners' online participation showed that they confirmed the reality of computer – mediated learning material as an indispensable aspect of distance language learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

The questionnaire survey and the final examination grades of Foreign Language Learners suggest that using e-learning or blended-learning influence the quality of students' learning

It was found that when students engaged in web-based and used online materials, they achieved more knowledge, more interest, and motivation for expressing themselves. Computer-aided materials improved their pronunciation in a large scale. They become more active in the process of learning.

The results, for example, reveal that highly structured, planned activities that include directed roles and responsibilities for the students, contribution in computer-aided material are key elements to moving students to higher level of learning and self-confidences. At the early stages of using e-learning the study showed that "without teachers guidance and presence and lack of Internet access, students were found to be frustrated. It was a big challenge for them. But after being exposed to a lot of authentic language learning material, they found the effectiveness of using information communication technologies as a crucial part of their learning process.

Moreover, limited face to face meeting have made online learning an important part of teaching – learning endeavour at PNU.

The evaluation of this study showed that e-learning encouraged learners' active involvement, which needs to be improved more and more by providing ICT facilities. E-learning or electronic distance learning is a useful support system for foreign language learners in distance education.

Suggestions

Where once only traditional teaching methods

through self-instructional mode were used for teaching Foreign Language Learning in PNU, now there is a crucial tendency to use innumerable resources available on the Internet. These resources can be used to 'warm-up' the class and stimulate discussion. For example, news articles can be used to start a discussion, about anything ranging from the social to politics, limited only by the ability of the students to communicate in English.

This is viable with the presence of a teacher, aided by computer (blended learning approach), i.e. when the computer is used to aid and reinforce 'traditional teaching', the teacher can lead the class through the learning experience, offering some of the activities online.

Moreover, in order to provide a blended-learning environment, PNU must provide computers, multimedia equipments, online interactive facilities, I.T. skills courses for most of the students. Therefore, in order to develop language learning quality in PNU, e-learning components in a 'Blended learning' approach seems to be vital. At the same time, more could be done to enhance staff development activities through strategic planning.

The learners at PNU need some of the learning material to be accompanied with voice facilities so that they will not feel the absence of a teacher and also will improve their lack of self-confidence in the area of expressing short stories or learning materials.

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Appendix 1**Survey Questions to explore Access, Availability, Skill levels, and Motivation of using
ICT**

1. Are there computers available at the university?
2. Are there computers available for regular use at the university?
3. Has the university provided training to improve the students electronic search skills?
4. Has the university provided training to increase the learners knowledge on instructional resources available on the Internet?
5. Do you have a computer at home?
6. Is the computer at your home connected to the Internet?
7. Do you play games online?
8. Do you use search engine?
9. Are you satisfied with working computer?
10. Do you think using computer-aided material accompanied by voice improve your pronunciation?
11. Does it improve your self-confidence?
12. Does it improve your self-confidence?
13. Do you like to learn your course through face-to-face and online learning?
14. Are you satisfied with learning through computer?
15. Are you aware of educational technologies?
16. Have you ever used educatinal technologies ?
17. How often do you use a computer?
18. Who is your Internet service provider?
19. How many people use the computer in your home?
20. What is the type of Internet connection in your computer?
21. What is your proficiency level in using the Internet?
22. How often do you play online games?
23. How often do you use search engines?
24. What is your opinion of this questionnaire? ■