

## INDIVIDUAL WEBSITES: INNOVATION FOR RAISING LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN ADULT LEARNERS

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The first step toward change is awareness. Nathaniel Branden

*The paper aims to demonstrate how weblogging can raise learners' language awareness and prepare them for communication in the networked world. The research included the application of the innovative technique for written and oral communication in English classes. The exploratory study of using a variety of Information Communication Technology activities at tertiary level was conducted. Class experiences of creating weblogs for learning purposes and using them for online activities with the students who learn English for Specific Purposes are described. The methods employed for data gathering consisted of administering specially designed questionnaires, analyzing students' responses, carrying out weblogging activities, providing feedback to learners, evaluating students' performance in various online activities, and finally assessing the utility of weblogging. Our results show that the experience of public writing provides an important opportunity for learning English. Despite a limitation of research - the data are received from a comparatively small sample of participants - some practical implications are indicated.*

**Keywords:** e-learning, weblogs, language awareness, self-evaluation, language skills.

### Introduction

Recent innovations of e-learning include weblogs which can serve as a valuable tool for teaching writing in a foreign language. The advantages of blogging in language classes comprise: instant publishing online, having a readership, additional reading practice, and creating an online portfolio of student written work, to name but a few.

The object of our research is application of e-learning in English for Specific Purposes classes. The aim of the research is to investigate how weblogging can help to raise language awareness at tertiary level. The methods of the research include the analysis of learners' self-evaluation data, a quantitative study and statistical treatment of obtained results. The paper explores the problem of effective e-learning activities.

The main hypothesis of this article is: language awareness can be raised by learner reflections on performed activities and experience in revising work. The implications of weblogging in English teaching are discussed.

**Literature review: weblogs in English teaching.** Application of Information Communication Technology in language learning has become very popular. Recent innovation such as weblogs offers learning opportunities online (Godwin-Jones 2003). Weblogging does not require any knowledge of software. Weblog entries are usually followed by a comment area which allows readers to write a response into the original text. Weblogs are easily linked and cross-linked, to create larger on-line communities. Language learners can use a personal

weblog as an electronic portfolio that shows development over time. By publishing the blog online, the student has the opportunity of writing for readers beyond their classmates. Readers in turn can comment on what they have read. Weblog entries are made by typing directly into the browser and with the click of a button are instantly published on the Internet. Webloggers can extend their ability to customize the layout of their weblog, e. g. add pictures to enhance its attractiveness.

There are three types of blogs which were primarily described by A. P. Campbell (2003): the tutor weblog, the learner weblog, and the class weblog. The tutor runs the weblog for the learner, and its purpose is to give reading practice to the learners, promote exploration of English websites, encourage online exchange by use of comment buttons, provide class or syllabus information, and serve as a resource of links for self-study. The learner weblogs are run by individual learners themselves. The class weblog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. It can be used for posting messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics. Class weblogs could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange (Campbell 2003). Attitude to weblogs differs: some students loathe weblogs for their poor or non-standard English, others love their authenticity and liveliness (Eastment 2005: 358). Weblogs can help students reflect on their learning and be a rich source of ideas and authentic contemporary language, but strangely, there do not seem as yet to be many English teaching weblogs. Good features of a weblog application were analyzed by Hall (online), who pointed out that students' reactions to the weblogs were generally positive; most students were very diligent in posting to their weblogs; students were able to read each other's opinions and observations; the instructor received invaluable feedback from the students about class activities; class members were able to share differing opinions freely. Bad features of weblogs (Hall online) included: entries were often written for the sake of completing an as-

signment; students commented less on each other's weblogs as the semester progressed; some of the student's weblogs were ignored by their classmates; common problems include forgotten passwords, usernames, and e-mail addresses; weblogs soon become outdated and discontinued after the class ended.

Reasons for using weblogs are numerous (Stanley online), i. e. to provide a real audience for student writing, to provide extra reading practice for students, to increase the sense of community in a class, to encourage students to participate, to create an online portfolio of student written work. The novelty factor creates student interest in starting to use weblogs. It is claimed that weblogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them, but if learners are not encouraged, weblogs can quickly be abandoned. According to J. Walker (2005: 115), who applied weblogging in his classes, by the end of the semester the majority of students said they had enjoyed weblogging and found it valuable. Some students wrote with great enthusiasm and adapted their templates daily to reflect on the newly acquired skills and new aspirations. Some students absolutely hated being forced to weblog. Most of the students stopped weblogging when the semester was over, but about 20 % continued.

A. P. Campbell (online) researched learner attitudes to weblogs by administering an anonymous survey to 57 learners in four classes. His results can be summarized as follows: the large majority (86 %) feel that the blog is 'OK' or 'good'; most students only rarely or occasionally read the entries, preferring instead to go straight to the class websites for homework or presentation information. Learners' seem to prefer to do only what is required of them. This assumption is reinforced by decreasing numbers of learners following links in the entries and making comments. The majority (95 %) rarely or never utilize the learning resources available for self-study via permanent links in the margins of a weblog. Although most learners recognized the value of a weblog, they claimed that they didn't have the time to take advantage of it.

Teaching writing and reading English for Specific Purposes through weblogs was studied by J. A. Arani (2005 online), who maintains that approximately three quarters of the class of forty students preferred writing the weblog to the more traditional written journal; most students believed that the weblog can improve English; seven disagreed; 15 students said that they would definitely continue using the weblog; 15 said they definitely would not, and 10 were unsure.

Learner development is directly related to the language awareness. In particular, language awareness is essential in writing because it refers to the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language (Carter 2003: 64). Language awareness does not simply involve a focus on language itself, but it also implies cognitive reflection upon language. In order to raise language awareness learners must be constantly given choices in learning. Choices include a diversity of activities and cater for learners' multiple learning styles and strategies. Language awareness can be successful if learners keep reflecting on their learning. Administering questionnaires relevant to language learning allows to raise students' awareness of new factors that can facilitate and enhance learning and make them reflect upon the learning process. The application of weblogging for accomplishing various assignments may encourage students to think about their performance in class activities.

The crucial question to be explored therefore is how to raise language awareness in learners and prepare them for communication in the networked world by applying weblogging in English classes.

## Respondents and research methods

The participants in this research were the first year students of the Faculty of Social Policy at Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania. They studied English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The design of ESP course reflected the learners' needs in professional language and adjusted to requirements of students seeking a Bachelor of Social Science degree. Total number of respondents was 33, and the majority of them (30) were females aged 19 and 20. The average level of L2 proficiency, which is usually assessed by administering Oxford Placement Test at the outset of ESP course, is pre-intermediate, although there were a few students of intermediate proficiency. The period of research project on application of weblogging in the ESP classes lasted one term.

The employed methods of gathering data consisted of administering specially designed questionnaires, analyzing students' responses, carrying out weblogging activities, providing feedback to learners, evaluating learners' performance in various online activities, and analyzing the utility of weblogging.

Two questionnaires were designed in accordance with scientific standards (Dornyei 2003: 16). The first questionnaire sought to research the students' needs through self-evaluation of language skills and performance in various class activities. It is not reproduced in this paper due to its simplicity. The second questionnaire tried to establish students' perceptions of their experience at weblogging. This questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix 1. The data are described below.

The design of the research included the creation of weblogs for each participant of the project. The individual blogs were created by employing a free service available online <http://www.blogger.com>. There was no difficulty in creating a personal blog for each learner because our English language classroom is equipped with computers. Weblogs created by students were downloaded to the teachers' weblogs <http://anusienelilija.blogspot.com> and <http://mazeikiene.blogspot.com>. All blogs are also available through the project initiator's & coordinator's weblog <http://gkavaliauskiene.blogspot.com>. Any learner's weblog can be entered by clicking on his or her surname, and

all entries can be viewed or commented on in provided comments column. The various assignments were carried out during consecutive classes and described by learners.

## Results and discussion

### Needs analysis through self-evaluation of language skills and performance

The best way of investigating learners' needs is an opinion poll. It was conducted by the means of self-assessment of language skills and performance in class activities. The learners were requested to evaluate their proficiency by writing the first entry in individual weblogs. In addition they were asked to evaluate themselves by giving themselves a mark on the scale of 5 to 10 (grade scale): 10 – excellent, 9 – very good, 8 – good, 7 – adequate, 6 – satisfactory, 5 – weak. Self-evaluation in grades was not recorded in weblogs. This was done in order to conceal the identity of the students thus preserving their self-esteem.

The self-evaluation data are shown in Fig 1. The numbers above the bars show the percentage of respondents that judged their skills by awarding themselves an appropriate grade. Reading skills were assessed favorably probably because it is easy to conceal flaws in reading comprehension. It is apparent that listening, writing, and speaking skills were judged differently: nobody felt they excel at them, and students gave themselves lower grades. This learners' feedback was very valuable for teachers who wished to analyze students' needs in order to plan classroom work that would benefit students best.

The learners' self-assessment of performance in vocabulary tests, presentations and class discussions is displayed in Fig 2. As can be seen in this chart, none of the students gave themselves excellent grades for knowledge of ESP vocabulary. However performance in presentations was evaluated higher. It stands to reason: presentations are prepared in advance, and students are more successful in making 'ready-made' speeches. Evaluation of performance in discussions was more modest: speaking impromptu in front of the audience is never an easy task, par-

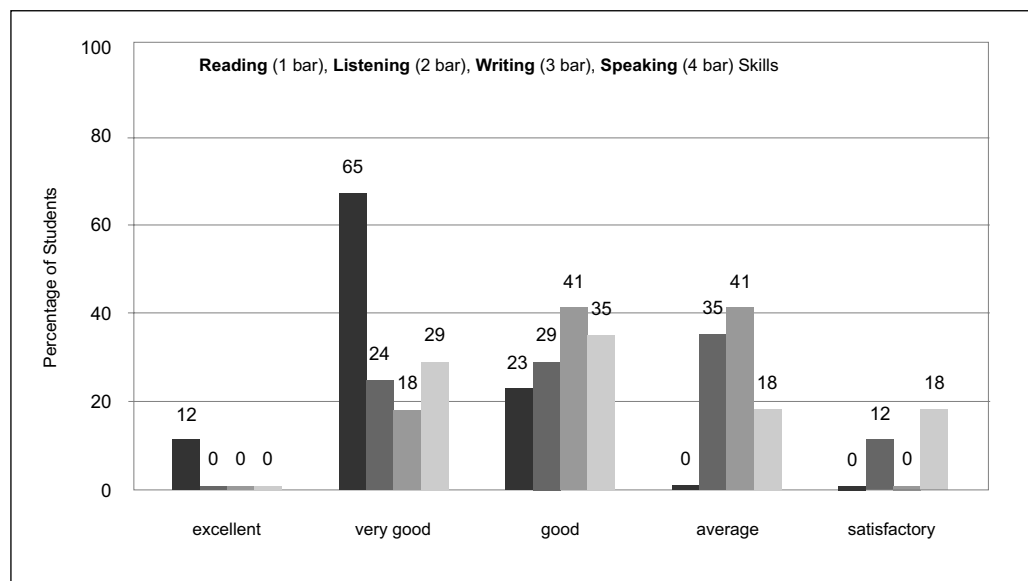


Fig 1. Self-evaluation of language skills

ticularly for shy students. This explains why so many learners evaluated their performance in discussions poorly.

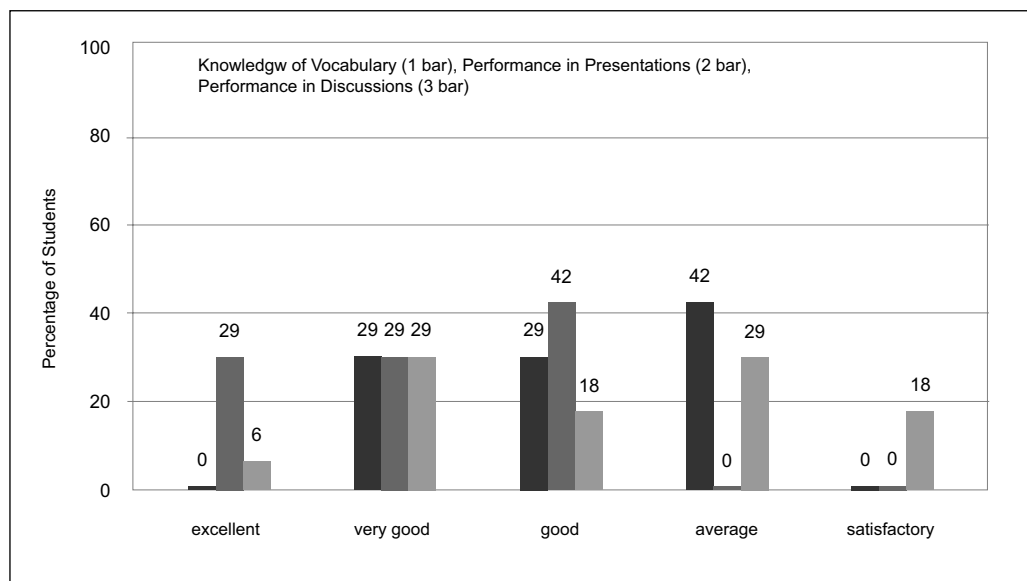
It should be noted that learner self-assessment provided insights into students' needs. Teachers became aware of the necessity to perfecting writing and listening skills and enlarge learner knowledge of active vocabulary.

### Activities of listening online

The second assignment included individual online listening to recordings on the world service of BBC and specially designed for learning English by a famous British linguist, Professor David Crystal. These recordings go under the title 'Keep Your English Up To Date', and at the time of our activities these recordings were available at the BBC language learning website [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1728\\_uptodate/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1728_uptodate/)

On this particular website there were 26 recordings altogether. Each student was requested to choose two recordings to her or his liking,

listen to them as many times as necessary for complete comprehension, then subsequently read the tape-script, which was available for each theme, and listen again. Finally, students had to describe their listening experience in individual weblogs. The unusual feature of this exercise was the lack of ear-phones at each computer in the classroom. Therefore, as learners chose to listen to different recordings at the same time, the 'noise' in the classroom hindered the audibility. In teachers' opinion, such interference resembles to some extent real-life listening environment and provides conditions for learners to relax, concentrate on their own task, and not to worry for not being able to follow everything immediately. This technique in psychology is known as "shadowing the message", i. e. trying to hear what they choose. Each learner's description of this experience can be viewed in her or his individual weblogs. Some learners were aware of the utility of real-life listening, i. e. background noise was not supposed to be a hindrance, although others preferred ideal listening conditions, i. e. complete silence in the classroom. Such an experiment of indi-



**Fig 2.** Self-evaluation of vocabulary knowledge or performance in activities

individualized listening allows learners to work at their own pace, make choices for themselves, improve their listening skills as well as heighten their awareness of cultural issues through listening. Knowing that a skill of listening is much to be desired for many learners, individualized listening practice is a must in class settings.

### **Writing activities: opinion essays and comments**

Writing opinion essays on one of the suggested ESP themes such as Human Rights, Freedom of Speech and Expression, The Law and the Family, was part of writing activities. Written essays can be viewed and assessed in the students' weblogs. It is worth noting that some students have written extensively and expressed interesting ideas, but some have just mentioned trivial things without giving deeper insights into the topic. This shows a particular learner's lack of preparation to accomplishing his or her assignments.

Reading their peers' weblogs and writing comments was also part of writing practice. Not surprisingly, some learners turned to their native language in this task. Overall everybody was positive about their peers' entries. There were no critical remarks or negative comments. Students were obviously aware of the public nature of their publication and avoided being critical or categorical in their judgments.

In this project, the teachers encountered some problems. It is worth noting that not every participant of the project accomplished all assignments. The major reason was the students' absences from classes. We did not expect the learners to accomplish their assignments in their spare time, although some students, who did not complete tasks in class, volunteered to finish assignments at home. Another common drawback was forgetting usernames and passwords that only owners of weblogs knew. Not being able to retrieve this information the blogger was unable to enter the editing pages of

his / her weblog, and therefore to update it, i. e. to change or add extra information. Moreover, some of the learners' weblogs were lost, mainly because students were unable to recall the titles of their blogs.

### **Analysis of students' writing**

At the end of the weblog project the teachers performed the analysis of students' writing. This analysis allows to get insights into the systematic nature of errors and draw conclusions as to their nature and reason.

It is known that generally speaking, errors can be divided into 'interlingual errors', i. e. errors that occur between English and the mother tongue, and 'intralingual errors', i. e. those that occur within the language being learned (Bolitho & Tomlinson 2005: 78). Amongst the causes of the errors are: mother tongue interference, over-generalization, interference from items within English – cross association and false analogy. Errors might have more than one source; there could be two or more causes operating at the same time. Errors made by the students do not demonstrate any difficulties in understanding the course material. Many errors were made because of the students' carelessness or absent-mindedness. Here are some examples of spelling errors: a) personal pronoun "I" and words – "English", "British", "American" are not written in capital letters; b) some plural nouns ending in "y" – e. g. "sumarys". Other common errors are missing articles, confusing the usage of the possessive case, missing – s in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in the Present Simple, use of double negatives, misplaced apostrophes, subject-verb disagreement, usage of wrong prepositions and tenses; confused vocabulary, misuse of the infinitive and "to be". These errors are due to mother tongue interference. Word order mistakes are also frequent, and they are caused by the fact that word order in the students' mother tongue is rather flexible. It should be noted that both intralingual and interlingual errors were encountered in students' written work, and

they are typical of Lithuanian learners of English. Knowing/understanding the cause of the error can help teachers to help learners. When teachers are aware of learners' problems they are in a better position to decide what to do. The action teachers take can depend on a lot of different variables: whether the error is frequent or not, if it is important for communication or not, whether it takes place in a controlled or uncontrolled activity, if it is an individual problem or widespread amongst the group (Bolitho & Tomlinson 2005: 79). After analyzing the students' writing assignments, we have written our comments in each learner's weblog and asked the students to correct their errors. The remedial work was supposed to have been done by the learners in the same section of comments, so that everybody can see how well learners have done it. It is well known that generally students dislike doing remedial work on paper assignments. The reason is quite simple: students are only interested in grades and many do not even bother to read teacher's remarks. In this experiment, grades were not awarded as to motivate learners to do their best in correcting their writing. Grades for taking part in this project and accomplishing assignments were awarded at the end of the semester. Naturally, each student was graded depending on her / his actual performance.

## Analysis of feedback

Students' and teachers' feedback is important part of successful learning and teaching. For this reason, the final phase of research consisted of: first, the analysis of students' responses to the questionnaire and, second, the teachers' online feedback, which was given in the form of comments on each learner's written assignments. The questionnaire on application of weblogs for learning English is presented in Appendix 1.

Learners' responses to Likert's scale questions on scale 1 to 5 (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree) allow to calculate the Means, Standard Deviations, and frequencies of optional choice. The obtained data are shown in Table.

On average, the respondents rated items 2 (listening online) and 3 (reading other people's blogs and writing comments) favorably: the Means for both items are the highest in comparison to other items. However, Standard Deviations differ: 1,18 and 0,82. The former indicates a higher scatter than the latter. Online listening is supported by 71,5 % of respondents. Online reading and commenting is favored by 78 % of students. The Means for writing and publishing online (item 1 in Table) and for writing online essays (item 4) are close: 3,93 and 3,89, although Standard De-

### *Means, Standard Deviations and Frequencies of Responses on Likert's Scale*

Utility of Activities	Likert Mean	Likert Standard Deviation	Strongly disagree, %	Disagree, %	Not sure, %	Agree, %	Strongly agree, %
1) writing & publishing	3,93	0,88	–	3,5	11	61	21
2) listening	3,96	1,18	7	3,5	18	28,5	43
3) reading blogs & writing comments	3,96	0,82	3,5	–	21	64	14
4) writing essays	3,89	0,72	–	7	11	68	14
5) I'll use my blog in the future	3,39	0,74	–	7	57	25	11

viation (SD) for the item 1 is higher (0,88) than for the item 4 (0,72). The higher value of SD signifies larger spread. The positive attitude to these two questions is shared by the same number of students – 82 %.

The most interesting responses are obtained on the future use of weblogs (item 5 in Table 1). The Mean is just 3,39, i. e. the smallest value in this Table, but the SD is not large, just 0,74. 57 % of respondents are not sure if they will use their weblogs in the future, although the frequency of positive responses is 36 %. This result is better than reported by Campbell (online) or Hall (online) probably due to the fact that we diversified the weblogs activities, and learners have not been bored with them yet. As it has been mentioned at the beginning of this article, adding variety to class activities and giving learners choices in learning stimulates motivation and interest.

Teachers' feedback finalizes the analysis of weblogging. Teachers gave feedback individually by writing comments in each learner's weblog. Our attitude to writing comments was straightforward: be as positive as possible, concise, up to the point and avoid harsh remarks. As it has already been mentioned our students were usually interested in their grades and quite often did not read teachers' remarks on paper written assignments. In weblogging, there were no grades awarded, but learners were aware that their weblogs could be viewed by any Internet browser or member of public. Therefore students did their best to make their blogs presentable. Regrettably, remedial work (error correction in the comments section of a weblog) was not done by all project participants although students showed their awareness of various mistakes during discussion. The usual excuse that students made was that it had to be done outside classroom hours at the end of the semester, when students were very busy preparing for exams and credits.

## Conclusions

The extent to which learners consciously focus on aspects of language and the degree of noticing

its particular features are debated by linguists and practitioners. This study documents the ways of raising language awareness that is important for language processing and learner development.

In the presentation of our results, we outline the opportunities for raising language awareness by employing an Information Communication Technology technique which allows learners to carry out assignments at their own pace and under non-threatening conditions. The online methodology involves creating an individual weblog by each student and using it for describing her or his own experience of learning English and accomplishing written assignments.

In this study we employed the assignments of self-evaluation, online listening, and writing an opinion essay and comments on peers' weblogs. The learners' self-assessment of productive and receptive language skills indicated weaknesses in acquisition of writing and listening. The students' descriptions of assignments in their weblogs allowed us to analyze their written work, provide feedback in the form of comments and encourage learners to do remedial work in the comment areas. Individual online listening at one's own pace prompts and motivates learners to improve skills of listening without being intimidated by possible failure.

## Implications of research

The implications of this research are numerous. First, application of weblogs in English classes can be used for raising language awareness and learner development. Second, weblogging can enhance the students' motivation due to the novelty and diversity of possible learning activities. Third, learning at one's own pace can help learners overcome their fear of making errors and enhance self-esteem. Fourth, weblogging is an enjoyable activity, which attracts the vast majority of students who are keen on having their own website. Fifth, teacher can provide individual feedback to each learner, and students



can receive feedback from classmates and any Internet reader. Finally, there is another possibility, which received too little attention in our research, i. e. learners' reflection on their performance and achievements. This opportunity was not fully used in this study due to the termination of the academic term and ESP course, but it could be of interest to teachers who wish to improve the quality of teaching. Moreover, even when the learners' products in weblogs are less than perfect, they show how students learn and what teachers teach. Orienting learners toward personal publishing on weblogs can help prepare them for communication in the networked world.

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## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire: Application of Weblogs for Learning English

1. Writing and publishing online is useful for improving writing skills. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
2. Individual listening to authentic English recordings online is helpful for developing listening skills. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
3. Reading other people's weblogs and writing comments is beneficial to raising language awareness. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
4. Writing an opinion essay on the ESP theme online is beneficial for consolidating professional knowledge. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
5. I will continue to use my weblog in the future: a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

## INDIVIDUALŲS TINKLAPIAI: UŽSIENIO KALBOS MOKYMO NAUJOVĖ

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*Mūsų tyrimų objektas buvo elektroninio mokymo taikymas mokant anglų kalbos specialiesiems tikslams. Tyrimų tikslas buvo nustatyti, kaip individualių tinklapių naudojimas įvairioms užduotims atlikti sudaro palankesnes galimybes studentų kalbos ypatybėms suvokti ir išmokti. Naudoti tyrimų metodai – studentų savianalizė, leidžianti nustatyti studentų mokymosi poreikius, kiekybinis vertinimas bei statistinis gautų duomenų apdorojimas. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama efektyvių elektroninių užduočių sudarymo problema. Pagrindinė darbo hipotezė: užsienio kalbos ypatumų suvokimas gali būti tobulinamas skatinant studentų refleksinį mąstymą ir patirtį atliekant įvairaus tipo užduotis. Nagrinėjamas pažangių elektroninio mokymo metodų taikymas per anglų kalbos pratimus universitetinėse studijose. Individualių tinklapių kūrimas ir naudojimas įvairioms interaktyvioms užduotims atlikti skatina studentų susidomėjimą, motyvus bei savarankiškumą. Rašymo ir klausymo įgūdžiai plėtojami studentams dirbant pasirinktu tempu. Atliktų darbų publikavimas internete kelia studento atsakomybę ir skatina kruopščiai atlikti užduotis. Dėstytojų ir studentų grįžtamasis ryšys padeda studentams analizuoti pasitaikančius kalbos netikslumus ir gerinti užduočių atlikimą. Individualių tinklapių naudojimas mokant užsienio kalbos yra perspektyvus ir rekomenduotinas universitetiniu lygiu.*

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** e-mokymasis, individualūs tinklapiai, kalbos įsisąmoninimas, savianalizė, užsienio kalbos įgūdžiai.

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