Developing students' autonomy and responsibility via promoting digital and media literacy in an English-language classroom

Розвиток автономії і відповідальності студентів через формування навичок медіа грамотності на заняттях з англійської мови

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Abstract

Digitalization of society necessitates the implementation of new technologies into an educational process on a daily basis, so educators are in constant search for new means of facilitating this process and should consider the challenges of a digital world. The paper hypothesizes the idea that by improving students' digital and media literacy using self and peer assessment techniques in blended learning, the effectiveness of the educational process will increase along with the development of students' responsibility and autonomy. To prove the assumed idea a research has been conducted with the students enrolled into the educational process of Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics (Ukraine). In the paper an alternative assessment method based on interrelation between students' digital and media literacy and their autonomy and responsibility is offered to be implemented in the English-language classroom.

Анотація

Діджиталізація суспільства зумовлює необхідність щоденного впровадження нових технологій у освітній процес, тому освітяни перебувають у постійному пошуку нових засобів поліпшення цього процесу та повинні враховувати виклики цифрового світу. У роботі висувається гіпотеза про те, що формуючи медіаграмотність студентів застосовуючи методики взаємооцінювання у змішаному навчанні, ефективність освітнього процесу підвищуватиметься, відповідальності та автономність студентів буде розвиватися. Для підтвердження гіпотези було проведено дослідження серед студентів Харківського національного економічного університету імені Семена Кузнеця (Україна). У роботі пропонується альтернативний метод оцінювання, заснований на взаємозв'язку рівня медіаграмотності студентів та їхньої автономії і відповідальності для впровадження на заняттях з англійської мови.

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Introduction

The rapid development of technology in the modern era makes people strive to introduce and implement innovative means and techniques into educational systems. Digitalization influences every sphere of our life that, subsequently, entails the necessity to consciously and selectively consume the information provided in media resources. New developments in information and communications technology have introduced significant opportunities for students in terms of accessing and processing information, thus ensuring effective communication, learning engagement, and entertainment. In this context, it is vital not to contribute to cultural and information overload, and to responsibly articulate thoughts and feelings (Kellner & Share, 2007a, p. 5).

Ubiquitously, educators find it difficult to adapt to the challenges of technological realities in the modern classroom (distance learning, blended learning, etc.) as learners are more willing to respond when they are allowed to use their smartphones and the Internet. Teachers, in their turn, need to embrace these changes, do more complicated tasks, and spend more time preparing the assignments and making them interactive (Borova et al., 2021, p. 86).

To support the development of students' transversal skills within lifelong learning, university teaching staffs help students to become better aware of their educational needs and learning characteristics, to reflect on their progress along the chosen pathway, and to verbalize their plans for the future (Tuchina et al., 2020, p. 217). As an innovative type specialist has to possess transversal skills that will help them easily adapt to any work, environment, or changes in the society (Ved, 2021). Thus, modern educational systems prioritize implementing computer systems into the educational process to make it more accessible, creative, and easily estimated (Borova et al., 2021).

Indeed, in the current information communications technology environment, digital and media literacy gains increasing importance in the computer-mediated cyberworld as people need to critically scrutinize tremendous amounts of information, putting new emphasis on developing communicative and transversal skills.

D. Scharf et al. (2007) argues that modern education and information literacy are iterative processes that require evaluation of information, critical thinking and reasoning, revision and integration, thus a significant degree of learner responsibility.

Discussing the trend in higher education toward learner autonomy and personal responsibility and their implications for digital and media literacy assessment, many scholars mention using digital means to conduct outcomes assessment. Active involvement of both teachers and students provided statistically significant effects in designing curriculum and achieving learning results (Rutz & Lauer-Glebov, 2005).

Seeking an alternative assessment method that would allow us to study the context of digital and media literacy alongside identifying the degree of students' autonomy and responsibility within university studies, we assume that there is some interrelation between the level of students' digital and media literacy and the level of their autonomy and responsibility for the educational process.

Moreover, we felt that this interconnection could provide meaningful data to the teachers in order to make valid inferences about student and institutional performance for the purpose of continuous improvement of the educational process. We agree that students' self-assessment has the power to improve students' performance and provide insight into their learning (Scharf et al., 2007). In this regard, this study illustrates a method of developing students' autonomy and responsibility and promoting digital and media literacy through conducting self and peer assessment while completing class assignments.

The research hypothesis is that by improving students' digital and media literacy using self and peer assessment techniques in blended learning, the effectiveness of the educational process will increase along with the development of students' responsibility and autonomy.

Literature Review

In the context of the introduction of distance learning, digital and media literacy is becoming even more crucial. Both lecturers and students have to be able to resolve the issues connected with evaluating and assessing the information provided and with the relevance of using it in the studying process and for professional purposes. According to UNESCO, media literacy is an ability to use information and communication techniques, to express yourself, and to communicate with the help of media technologies; to critically percept and interpret the information provided in media resources (*Mediasapiens*, 2016). It is also considered to be the ability to get and process the media sources information resulting in forming media culture (Karpenko, 2017, p. 61).

Being in a media environment, people are used to examining media data (*Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs*, 1999, p. 235). Thus, there is an urgent need to form the ability to critically view, listen and note so as not to be influenced by the harmful effects from the media (*Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs*,1999, p. 251). Davida Scharf et al. (2007) claim that the concept of digital literacy is becoming an increasingly important part of the nation's higher education agenda, thus universities need tools to evaluate the information literacy abilities of students.

In a modern educational system with a student-centered approach, media literacy occupies an important place. Teachers and lecturers of all the educational institutions widely use a number of texts and activities based on materials from mass, social and digital media, they encourage students to turn to films and blogs, websites, and social networks to vary the teaching and learning materials, thus, enabling students to take personal responsibility for their own learning (Hobbs, 2010, p. 22). T. Borova et al. (2019) argued that it is necessary to create such a pedagogical environment that would enhance the responsibility level of students. In this regard, possessing a set of different forms, methods, and tools that allow a learner to determine the goal, carry out educational activities, control, analyze and assess it, taking responsibility for their own learning makes a student autonomous and ready for life-long learning (Chekhratova, 2021, p. 43). By accepting responsibility in a meaningful context, learners have the opportunity to support others while also experiencing personal growth and to strengthen individual motivation in the learning process.

Thus, if students have an opportunity to express their views on certain problems and events, work with the information recently view in the press, they can easily work on self-development and self-education, needed for future professional activity, using media educational technologies (Hromova, 2020, p. 119).

Foreign researchers argue that digital and media literacy has to be taken into account starting from preschool with adding emphasis while educating further to encourage learners' ability to critique media culture and produce conclusions and solutions (Kellner & Share, 2007b, p. 69). That's why there is a number of in-depth researches about developing future teachers media literacy as scholars believe that following some specific media-based course students will be able to evaluate, select and adapt Internet materials for the purpose of teaching; to design assignments based on the found media resources to develop learners' tolerance, understanding, and awareness (Nikolaeva, Zadorozhna, & Datskiv, 2019, p. 227).

Concerning that, to train a high-professional specialist in any sphere, the modern system of education in Ukraine has to implement the ideas of media and digital literacy and a student-centered approach where the main emphasis is shifted from a teacher to learners, making them responsible for their own learning, thus autonomous. Moreover, modern understanding of the phenomenon of responsibility proves it to be a vital characteristic of human life in general, including all the areas of human activity. Many modern scholars, including T. Alekseiva (2019), O. Ponomarev et al. (2013), A. Mergler et al. (2007) M. Savchyn (2008) and others, emphasize the exclusive role of responsibility of a person within the technological society, which is associated with the significant influence of a modern person on all living creatures and the environment. In a pedagogical context, responsibility implies working in a positive atmosphere, interacting with colleagues, understanding learners' own responsibilities, and how their decisions will affect the team. N. Tuchina et al. (2020) support the idea by justifying that student-centered learning is an opportunity to create situations of active student interaction, to increase the internal motivation of students to learn, choose individual learning trajectories.

Implementing the discussed issues to the question of developing students' foreign language competence, we have to point out that promoting media literacy while accomplishing

media-based assignments, requires a high level of personal responsibility, and can be used as a means of developing students' communicative skills. Thus, an autonomous learner will use the skills and abilities acquired in the classroom in practice in extracurricular time (Little, n.d.) and further will be able to critically evaluate the information retrieved from digital and media resources.

According to the National Qualifications Framework (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2021), responsibility and autonomy are defined as an ability of a person to apply knowledge and skills independently and conscientiously. The descriptors of autonomy and responsibility at the sixth level of the NQF (Bachelor's Degree) presuppose an ability to manage complex technical or professional activities or projects; to take responsibility for making and approving decisions in unpredictable work and/or learning contexts; to form judgments that take into account social, scientific and ethical aspects of the organization and to manage the professional development of individuals and groups; to continue autonomous learning (*Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine*, 2021). Hence, fostering learners' responsibility and autonomy by developing media skills and knowledge, critical thinking, and media creativity will work for integrating Ukraine into the European Union (Karpenko, 2017, p. 63).

According to the Conception of implementing media education in Ukraine (Mediasapiens, 2016), one of the primary tasks in media education is developing independent critical thinking skills, to teach students to adapt to current information challenges in the media environment by forming their media culture. Applying the principles of digital and media literacy, learner autonomy, and creating a positive learning environment will work for developing their critical thinking, collaboration, reflection, creativity, and social responsibility (Hobbs, 2010, p. 24).

Therefore, higher education institutions themselves can be the key stakeholders to advance the crucial role of responsibility upon encouraging promoting the above-mentioned values and skills (Borova et al., 2019).

Methodology

In the research, a number of scientific methods were used, i.e. theoretical methods (generalization and comparative analysis of relevant pedagogical and psychological literature), empirical methods (observations, surveys, interviewing), and mathematical analysis of the findings needed to substantiate the results. The data were analyzed via Microsoft Excel 2010.

To prove the assumed idea that by improving students' digital and media literacy using self and peer assessment techniques in blended learning, the effectiveness of the educational process will increase along with the development of students' responsibility and autonomy, we have issued the research.

To conduct it 4 groups of students were selected. They are enrolled in the educational process of Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics for obtaining a Bachelor's Degree majoring in 051 International Economics, 073 International Management, and 072 Finance, Banking and Insurance. All the students study English as a foreign language within the same curriculum (1st year as a mandatory subject;2nd year as an elective course). According to the course programme, students are expected to prepare 2 presentations each semester. Thus, doing the research for 3 semesters (2 semesters in 2020-2021 and 1 semester in 2021-2022), we acquired data based on 6 different projects. The assignment is as follows: a student searches for a relevant newspaper, magazine, or journal article in English (the learners are encouraged to browse prominent international resources e.g. The Guardian, The Times, etc.), studies the article and prepares a presentation (usually a PowerPoint presentation) on the topic. In a usual way, lecturers assess the students' works, thus fully controlling the educational process.
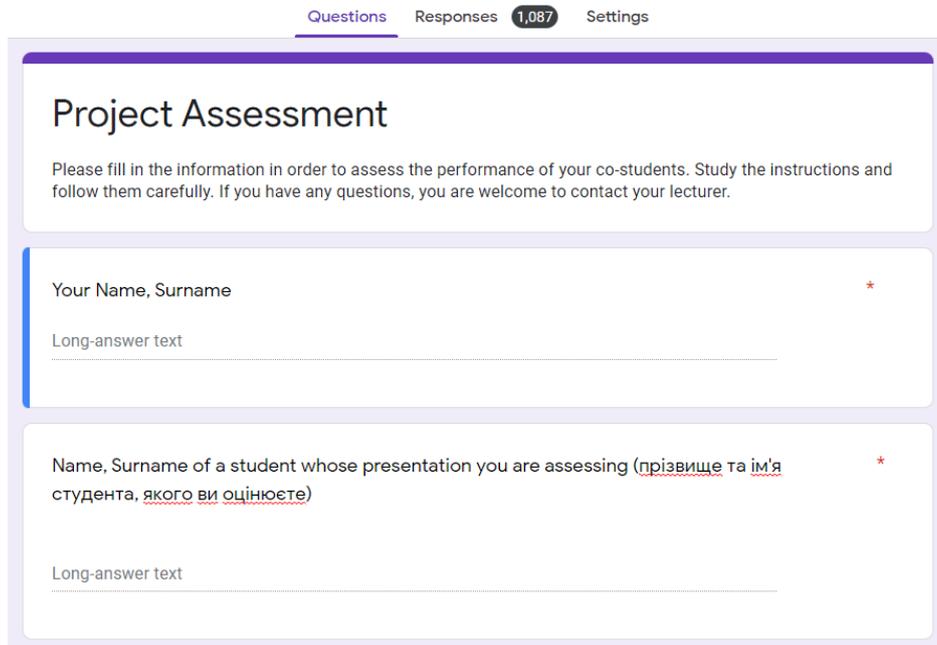
For the purpose of the research, 2 academic groups of 1st year students (28 and 31 people) completed 4 tasks in the way described above, making a control group (CG). 2 groups of 1st year students (28 and 29 people), making an experimental group (EG), were asked not only to prepare a presentation but also assess their groupmates' performance. As the research doesn't concern future teachers, the students are not expected to work out the evaluation criteria – that is a lecturer's job, although, if learners have some comments to make, they can add or edit the offered criteria. This stage of the research took place in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Starting their 2nd year, students do not have the mandatory subject of English but they are offered to master the language as an elective course. As learners are not obliged to continue studying the

language, 2 or 3 people in each of the academic groups chose other elective courses. For the purpose of relevant data, we did not include the gathered data about those students in the final analysis, hence we processed the data obtained from 50 students in EG and 50 students in CG. Doing the elective course, all the students, both in EG and CG, were asked to assess their groupmates' performance by using the Google forms platform. When students are offered to complete the Form (test/worksheet/evaluation list), they concentrate on what they have already accomplished, reflect on the learning process and become more autonomous, responsible for their learning (Borova et al., 2021, p. 83).

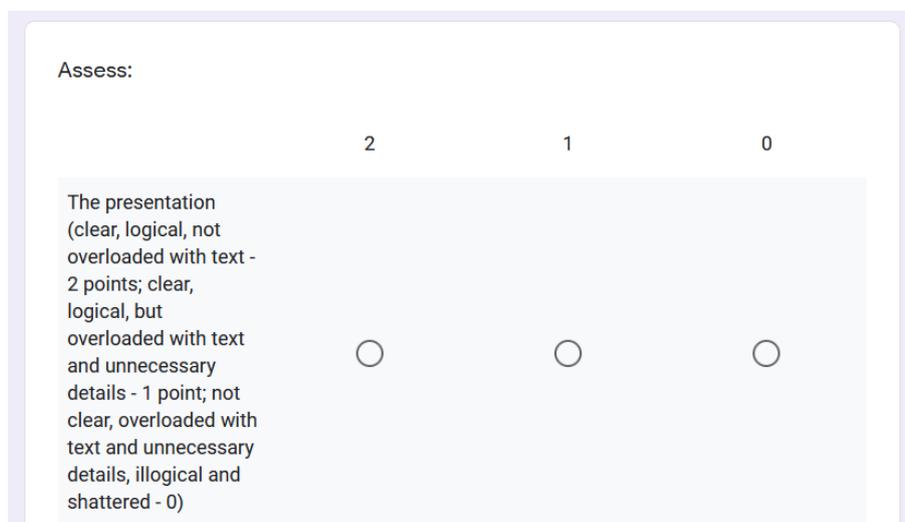The lecturer sends the link with detailed instructions on how to implement the assessment (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Assigning the task via Google Forms (Source: Authors' own conception).

The students are offered 4 criteria (the presentation, the text of the speech, student's speech, pronunciation, and vocabulary/grammar). For each of the steps, students can get 2 points, making the final mark of 8. Each of the criteria is explained in detail (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Conducting assessment via Google Forms (Source: Authors' own conception).

The presentation: if the PowerPoint presentation is clear, logical, not overloaded with text, a student can get 2 points; if it is clear, logical, but overloaded with text and unnecessary details – 1 point; if it is not clear, overloaded with text and unnecessary details, illogical and shattered – 0.

The text of the speech: if it is clear, easy to understand, familiar words and average-long sentences are used, a student will get 2 points; if the text, in general, is clear but overloaded with a lot of difficult words, dates, and figures, a presenter will get 1 point; if the text is too difficult to understand, overloaded with complicated/unknown words, there are many very long sentences which prevent a listener from getting the idea of the narration – 0.

Student's speech: if the student's speech is fluent, sounds natural, without many long or unnecessary pauses – 2 points; if the speech is not really fluent but sounds natural although there are too many long pauses – 1 point; if the speech sounds as if learnt by heart – 0.

Pronunciation and grammar: there are some minor grammar and pronunciation mistakes, a student gets 2 points; if it is difficult to get the idea because of the grammar and pronunciation mistakes – 1 point; if it is impossible to understand the text because of the mistakes in pronunciation and grammar – 0.

Results and Discussion

Having conducted the research, we have gathered and analyzed the information on all of the projects but in the paper only the data acquired from the latest assessment session is provided due to the assumption that the evaluation of the previous projects (5 sessions) was preparatory training. Furthermore, we emphasize that learner autonomy and responsibility cannot be achieved within one subject. It is a long and tedious process that requires much effort from both students and lecturers. While exercising peer assessment students learnt to critically evaluate both their own and their peer's performance, act responsibly, and reflect on information retrieved from media sources.

The results of students' assessment in both EG and CG compared with lecturers' evaluation in their percentage ratio are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1.
The comparative results of EG students peer assessment and the lecturer's evaluation of projects arranged by the total mark.

assessed by	total mark							
	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
students	18%	28%	14%	24%	12%	2%	2%	-
lecturer	12%	32%	12%	34%	8%	-	2%	-

Table 2.
The comparative results of CG students peer assessment and the lecturer's evaluation of projects arranged by the total mark.

assessed by	total mark							
	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
students	30%	34%	26%	6%	-	-	-	4%
lecturer	14%	32%	12%	30%	8%	2%	2%	-

As we can see from the Tables, the results of peer assessment in EG compared with the lecturer's one are approximately equivalent. The greatest fluctuation in the figures is 6% which makes us draw a conclusion that this occurred due to constant and repetitive collaborative work of a lecturer and the students on developing their responsibility and autonomy while critically evaluating digital and media resources. The findings suggest that the students in EG succeeded in following the criteria while assessing their peers; and during face-to-face interviews with individual students it was revealed that they strived not to depend on their personal preferences and not to be biased in their judgments but tried to be critical and fair, hence displaying a high level of students' responsibility and autonomy.

As for the results provided in Table 2, we can observe a considerable fluctuation in figures (24%). During face-to-face interviews with the students from CG, it was revealed that they lacked clear guidelines, struggled in striking a balance between being responsible and non-biased versus being imprudent and untrustworthy, it appeared to be difficult not to rely on their personal preferences and affections while evaluation the peers.

Another point that can be considered is encouraging students to comment on their marks, thus personalizing their judgements (Fig. 3). The first striking point here is that not all of the students completed that part of the task as it wasn't marked as an obligatory one, and they had a choice not to do it. The second negative observation is that some of the students failed to understand the necessity to comment in English as they consider the task either unreasonable or too complicated or they see no point in doing it. The above-mentioned facts can be interpreted as a manifestation of a low level of learner autonomy and responsibility.
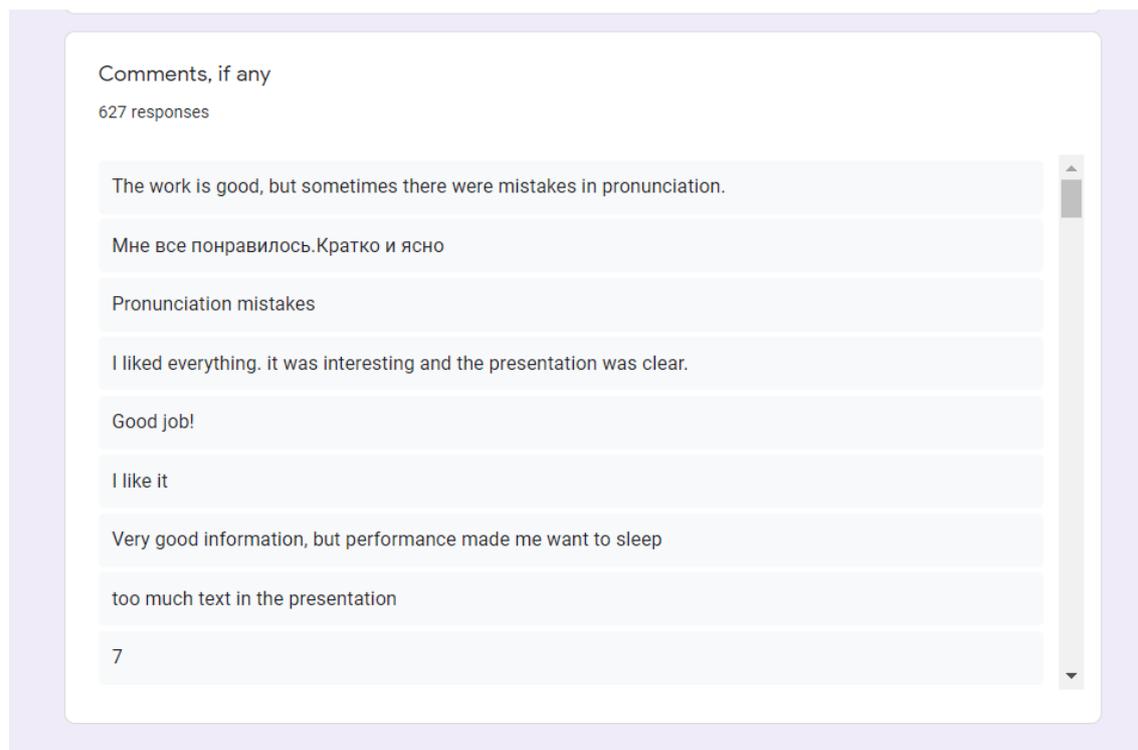

Figure 3. Feedback provided by the students while peer assessing in Google forms (Source: Authors' own conception)

Additionally, the data acquired from the comments can be used for the sake of further developing learners' responsibility and autonomy. Critical analysis of the judgements enables students to evaluate not only their language performance but see the importance of promoting digital and media literacy. In most cases, students do not consider the information and the presentation itself from the point of view of being relevant or irrelevant, trustworthy or fake. In their comments, they mostly use words like *good*, *amazing,* or *interesting,* and, thus, pay no attention to whether the content is true, well-written, or well-chosen.

The series of interviews with EG students revealed that being accustomed to assessing the groupmates' performance, the learners worked on developing their critical thinking skills, the ability to work independently, to evaluate and analyze information, to distinguish between "relevant/irrelevant" data and "trustworthy/predator" resources; the ability to reflect on their own learning process and to take responsibility for their decisions within a social environment, to be able to provide unbiased feedback and not take into account personal preferences; some learners reported applying the acquired skills into their social networking and personal life.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of developing students' autonomy and responsibility via promoting digital and media literacy in an English-language

classroom has been proved with the described research. We have practically verified that by improving students' digital and media literacy using self and peer assessment techniques in blended learning, the effectiveness of the educational process will increase along with the development of students' responsibility and autonomy.

We see the prospects for further investigation in exploring methods, means, and tools for acquiring digital and media literacy and transversal skills which, in turn, entails fostering learners' responsibility and autonomy.

Moreover, meaningful and responsible use of technologies enables students to critically process not only educational information but also the digital data retrieved from social networks and informational websites.

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