INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN SPORTS

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ABSTRACT
Introduction: The main task of the specialized foreign language course for PhD students at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" is to help them revise and improve their language knowledge and skills in the specialized area of their scientific work. A new methodology was developed for the purpose using innovative technologies and interactive techniques.
Aim: The aim of the present research was to study doctoral students' attitudes to the specialized English course using the new methodology in the spring semester of the 2024-2025 academic year.
Methods: A survey was conducted with 12 doctoral students from all the professional fields of study at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski". A questionnaire was completed by the doctoral students at the end of the term. Survey data were processed with frequency statistical analysis.
Results and discussion: The survey results show that 90% of the respondents often use the English language for their research work, and they need oral and written language practice in their field of study. Most of the respondents find specialized language exercises with innovative technologies very useful. They all like the discussions, teamwork, and the interactive methods applied. More than half (about 60%) of them prefer face-to-face education, and the others prefer blended learning. About 90% of the respondents share the opinion that having individual assignments and presentations is beneficial in gaining experience for independent research and presentations to a highly qualified audience.
Conclusion: Applying modern technologies and interactive techniques in language learning can help PhD students to upgrade their language knowledge and skills for their research work and participation in scientific forums.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern technologies in foreign language learning are developing very fast. At the beginning of the 21st century, CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) was introduced as an important branch of applied linguistics, and about ten years later, MALL (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning) was introduced in response to the mass application of mobile phones in the process of education. The recent promotion of the AI program ChatGPT presents still more opportunities and challenges. Technology-based language learning involves a wide range of tools and services, including internet access, a desktop, a laptop, a tablet, a smartphone, and the necessary software and programming. It is important for students and lecturers to acquire and constantly upgrade their technical skills and competencies in order to be able to use innovative technologies in foreign language learning. Modern technologies can provide useful information and access to authentic written, video, and audio materials, offering opportunities for communication, interaction, and feedback. There is, however, an important question posed by some researchers: whether and how using technologies can potentially impact language learning. According to some authors (Golonka et al., 2014; Higgins et al., 2007), using technologies in a lesson or instructional unit does not automatically guarantee quality language learning. Lecturers should focus on the properties of the technologies they want to use and how they meet their learning goals, "how an application or a technology-based task works" and whether it "fits" the students' needs and the lecturer's expectations. Teachers should "experiment" with the chosen learning tools themselves first, then monitor the learning process and reflect on the acquired results and students' feedback, modifying the tasks and the applications when necessary and advising students how to use technologies efficiently for their individual learning needs (Hubbard, 2023).

Interactive techniques and teamwork are also very useful in foreign language learning, as they offer a

close-to-natural environment for language practice through communication and the exchange of information (Brown, 2006). Modern technologies offer numerous opportunities for interactive communication – including pair and small group work on listening or reading tasks using the internet or other online sources, watching videos followed by group discussions, and preparing materials for presentations, among others. These offer good chances for students to correct and improve their communicative, reading, listening, and pronunciation skills. A "flipped classroom" approach can be another possibility in this respect, providing opportunities for students to prepare for a task or group activity in advance using online materials or sources presented by the lecturer (Honeycutt, 2014).

Language learning at the National Sports Academy is specialized in the fields of sport, physical education, physiotherapy, wellness, and health care. Modern technologies and the application of interactive methods in language learning are widely used in the Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD programs at the National Sports Academy "V. Levski" (Hristakieva, 2021; Slavova et al., 2019). The PhD program of foreign language learning was created for the needs of doctoral students specializing in one of the five basic areas of study: professional sport, physical education, kinesitherapy, healthcare, spa, and wellness.

Aim and Objectives

The *aim* of the present study was to evaluate the attitudes of PhD students at the National Sports Academy towards a new specialized English course that incorporates innovative technologies and interactive techniques. The research was conducted following the implementation of the new methodology in the spring semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. The specific *objectives* of the study were: to identify the language learning skills and needs that the PhD students in sport science wish to improve; to assess the perceived usefulness of the interactive techniques (e.g., discussions, teamwork, presentations) applied in the course; to determine students' preferences regarding the mode of the course delivery (face-to-face, blended or entirely online); to evaluate the utility of the new e-book and its components.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted at the end of the semester with 12 doctoral students from the five professional fields of study at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski". Participation in the survey was optional, and it was conducted after the students' final examination. Doctoral students participating in the survey had to use an online form in Google Forms. The survey was anonymous. The research subjects completed a questionnaire with 10 closed-ended questions. Eight of the survey questions had multiple-choice options, and two questions had yes/no options. The survey questions were focused on doctoral students' language needs and preferences connected with their thesis research, i.e., which language skills they needed to improve, the specialized language activities in the coursework they found useful, the interactive techniques they considered appropriate for their language needs, their attitude to using innovative technologies in the language course, etc. Survey data were analyzed using frequency statistical methods.

Course Methodology and Materials

The new methodology provides doctoral students with more opportunities to develop their communicative competence, encompassing linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic aspects (Canale & Swain, 1980; CEFR, 2001), for academic purposes. The *main objectives* of the new methodology are to help doctoral students upgrade their specialized language knowledge and skills in English, enhancing their reading comprehension, vocabulary, academic writing, and speaking skills in key areas of sports science. The language level is B2–C1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001). The *instruction materials* include an e-textbook, specially designed for the needs of doctoral students at the Academy, as well as additional materials related to the specific research interests of each student. The e-textbook consists of five sections, devoted to the five areas of scientific study at the Sports Academy (Hristakieva & Marinova, 2025). Each of the units inside the sections provides academic materials on relevant topics enhancing comprehension and analysis skills, vocabulary-building activities focused on terminology in each area, case study analysis, guidance on writing styles and language structures typical for sports science articles and research works, listening comprehension practice via specialized video materials from YouTube and speaking practice exercises - discussing concepts, defending ideas, and presenting research. The e-textbook is available online for all doctoral students, allowing individual or small group assignments to be given in advance for the following

seminars. Apart from the e-book materials, each student is supposed to give an oral presentation in the specialized field of his/her thesis work, and to answer any questions on the presentation topic posed by his/her colleagues in the group. The *role of the lecturer* is to monitor and facilitate the coursework without directly interfering with doctoral students' learning activities. The course aims to prepare doctoral students for independent academic work and participation in scientific forums using a foreign language, English in particular. Having in mind the vastness and complexity of each of the five areas of study mentioned above, this is a very hard task to achieve in a limited amount of time. Nevertheless, some conscious effort has to be made in this direction.

RESULTS

To the first question of the survey, *whether they need to use English in their research work*, 10 out of the 12 respondents pointed out that they often use it in their scientific work, and two of them indicated that they rarely or never use English. The second question, *which language skills they need to improve*, is a multiple-choice question, and the respondents gave more than one answer (Figure 1). The greatest number of them (8) indicated speaking as one of the language skills they need to improve.

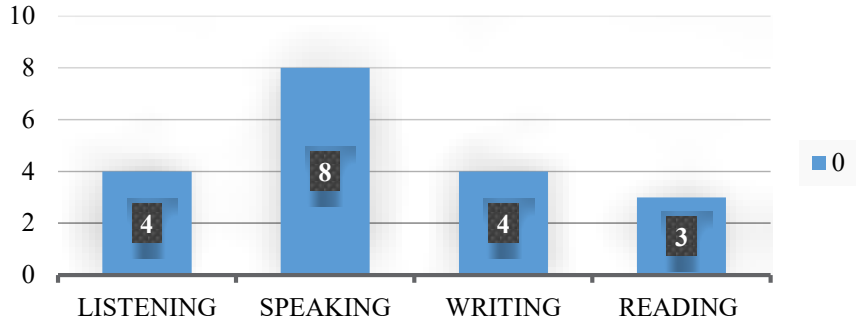

Figure 1. *Language skills that doctoral students need to improve.*

To the third question, *how they would like the specialized English language course to be conducted*, 7 of the respondents selected the face-to-face form, and 5 selected the blended learning form. No one indicated the online distant learning form (Figure 2).

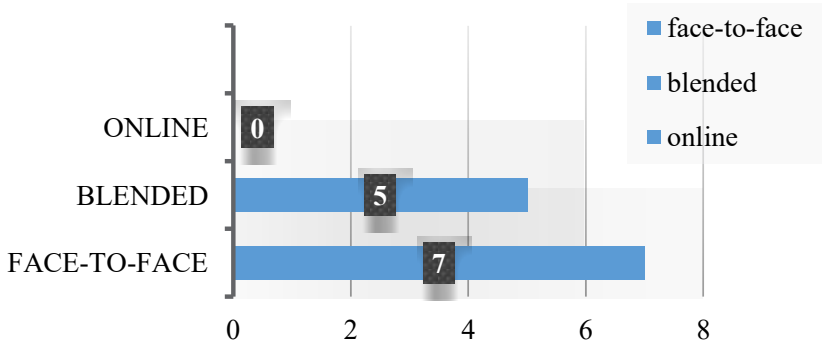

Figure 2. *PhD students' preferences regarding the organization of the English course.*

The fourth and fifth questions are also multiple choice ones, so more than one answers were given by most of the respondents. To the fourth question, *which elements of the e-textbook English for PhD Students in Sports Science they like*, 8 of the respondents indicated the item *discussions on a given topic, 6 pointed to oral presentations, 5 respondents pointed to working with texts*, 5 indicated *lexical exercises*, and 4 indicated *listening for specific information*. To the fifth question, *which components of the e-textbook English for PhD Students in Sports Science they find most useful*, the item *discussions on a given topic* were pointed out by the greatest number of respondents (8), followed by the item *lexical exercises* (7) (Figure 3). The items *oral presentations* and *listening for specific information* were indicated by 6 respondents each.

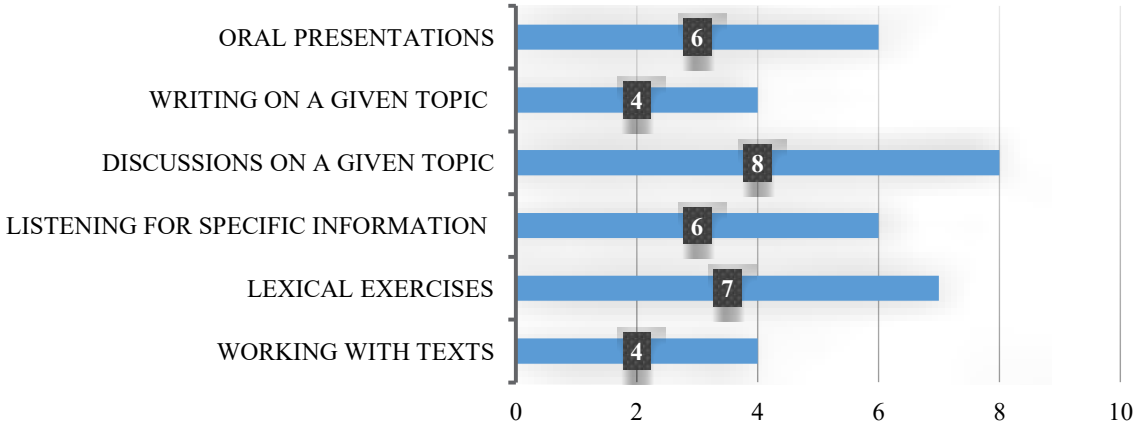

Figure 3. *Components of the English for PhD Students e-textbook are pointed out as most useful.*

To the sixth question in the survey, *whether there should be more teamwork in the seminars*, 11 out of all 12 respondents answered positively. To the seventh question, *whether each doctoral student should have an individual task to present to the group*, the majority of the respondents (10) answered positively. The remaining three questions were on the subjects' age group, gender, and education. The subjects of the research were 12 (7 women and 5 men), most of them (10) were over 30 years old, and two of them were in the age group 22-30. In terms of higher education degrees, 9 of the respondents received their higher education in the field of sport, while 3 of them had higher education degrees in other fields of knowledge. These last facts suggest that the participants in the survey were well-established specialists with serious scientific interests.

DISCUSSION

The results of the first question of the survey show that the majority of the respondents often use the English language, as the scientific sources in English are important for their research work. To the second question about the language skills they need to improve, speaking skills are pointed out by the greater part of the respondents. Writing and listening skills come next in importance. Oral communication in a foreign language for research and academic purposes requires more practice and an appropriate environment to build confidence in addressing a highly qualified and informed audience. Writing skills also need time and a lot of practical experience for better results. The language practice provided in the specialized language course for PhD students, using vocabulary exercises, presentations, and other interactive techniques, can be useful in this regard. The results of the third question show the respondents' preference for the in-person form of learning. Similar to previous studies (Zsheliaskova-Koynova, Hristakieva, 2022), doctoral students would like to have direct contact with their peers and lecturers, to be able to communicate, to share opinions, and to take part in discussions. The blended form also offers some advantages, combining in-person and online participation for those who may have urgent business obligations during the course of education, to stay connected and be informed of the current coursework. To the fourth and fifth questions, most of the respondents pointed out that they liked the discussions on a given topic, the lexical and listening exercises, and found them useful. These results again lead to the conclusion that PhD students need more speaking and listening practice using specialized English terminology for their research work in sports science, physical education, health care, or physiotherapy. The e-textbook *English for PhD Students in Sports Science* can be very helpful there, as it offers opportunities for doctoral students to use it at any time convenient for them, apart from the seminar work at the Academy. They can revise the reading tasks again and practice the lexical exercises at home at their own pace, or watch the video materials in the following unit and get acquainted with specialized terminology in advance for a problem-solving discussion at the next seminar. The results of the sixth and seventh questions clearly show that PhD students need more opportunities for teamwork and for interactive communication on scientific topics. Pair or small group tasks can be given to doctoral students from the e-book or using their own materials to prepare and present in front of the whole group. In this way, they will have more opportunities to present scientific research materials in front of their peers, to answer questions, to provide arguments, and to defend their thesis. Giving presentations on

their research topics in the friendly environment of their colleagues can help them learn from their mistakes and gain confidence for participation in bigger scientific forums. It has to be noted that the sample size of $n = 12$ is rather limited, which is due to the smaller number of PhD students compared to Bachelor's and Master's students at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski". Nevertheless, the acquired results are informative and useful for the purposes of the research.

CONCLUSION

The study results show that PhD students need more speaking and listening practice using English terminology in their research field – sports science, physical education, health care, physiotherapy or spa and wellness. Doctoral students enjoy the introduction of innovative technologies and interactive techniques in the specialized English language course and find them useful for improving their language knowledge and skills. Applying modern technologies and interactive techniques in language learning can help PhD students to upgrade their communicative competence for the purposes of academic research. This is a pilot study on the topic and it can be assumed as the starting point for further observations and research.

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