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ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS AND CANDIDATE TEACHERS TOWARDS DIGITAL TOOLS FOR GRAMMAR TEACHING AND A VIRTUAL IMPLEMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Language learning and teaching as an integrated process has incorporated the use of technology as virtual environments into this field. The nature of education has gained another dimension particularly after the pandemic, and the world has come to understand that it may not necessarily take place in the classroom; therefore, the use of virtual teachers has increased, which seems to open a new age of digital learning. With the issues on the agenda, the aim of this study is to describe the attitudes of the candidate teachers and those of the students towards Web 2.0 tools. The study intends to reveal the extent these tools are considered to be important by the two parties of language learning. The study also aims to underline the issue of cross-linguistic research to be considered while utilizing these virtual platforms. The participants are 152 students of a state school and 30 candidate teachers studying at the ELT Department of an Education Faculty. Four research tools, a survey, a translation test, an open-ended attitude questionnaire and a software program have been used for this mixed-methods research. According to the research findings, the majority of teacher candidates do not find the use of web 2.0 tools as the primary source for language teaching; rather, they think that these tools can be used as very effective means to engage the students into the task of learning. As for the learners; however, the virtual teacher created did the job of teaching successfully as it can be seen from the test results, and findings show that most of the learners have a positive attitude towards using Web 2.0 tools in all learning platforms.

Keywords: Teacher candidate attitude towards virtual learning , student attitude towards virtual learning, virtual classroom, linguistic parameters, Web 2.0 tools, EFL , SLA research

INTRODUCTION

Language learning and teaching as an integrated process has become an experience that has recently incorporated the use of technology as virtual environments into this field. Educators around the world have already got the benefits of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for language learning and teaching (Liou et al., 1992; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996, among others). Nowadays, it is easier to learn a foreign language since the learning does not have to be limited to classroom contact hours, it can go on as long as the learner wishes. There is a lot of research as regards the use of the Internet for language learning, which highlight the fruitful results of web-based learning (Schneider & Panichi, 2009; Lazarevic & Bentz, 2010; Girgin 2011, among others). Chapelle (2003) states that many English teachers accept the need for the learners to use the target language outside the classroom to develop their communicative competence (Hymes, 2001) and social interaction both in and outside the classroom as extra-curricular activities. Besides, after the pandemic, the use of virtual teachers has increased, and this seems to open a new age of digital learning. In this sense, there arises a need for virtual teachers to act as real ones. However, it is an undeniable fact that teacher competency is not limited to Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and that virtual teachers are expected to have some other merits to replace genuine teachers, at least as for the source of information.

The nature of education has gained another dimension, particularly after the pandemic, and the world has come to understand that it may not necessarily take place in the classroom. This situation has introduced the need for a substitute education system whose participants are the learners, the classroom context and the teachers, but all in the virtual environment. Teachers, the main actors in education, were not always available for the reasons that the pandemic imposed on them, even though classes kept running. Under the circumstances, the course was canceled, or compensation was made afterwards, which made the schedule off the usual track. Naturally, in such cases, teachers encountered the problem of finding extra practice opportunities for their learners on the web, the most commonly used environment for learning. To meet such a need, virtual teachers created with web 2.0 tools could have fulfilled this task of teaching if some arrangements had been made in the light of SLA research conducted with efficient guidance.

The use of technology is the replacement in case of a need; however, the course design for the linguistic content is of utmost importance. These courses cannot be based on random selections of content; on the contrary, they must be produced under the light of cross-linguistic Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. This means that not all web-based learning can meet the needs of learners. Language teaching; particularly, morpho-syntactic structures, should be presented from a cross-linguistic, comparative and contrastive perspective, and this can be done by language authorities who work in the field of applied linguistics. It is stated by Rossiter (2021) that being complex is not an inbuilt feature of grammar; grammar can be made simple or rather complex, varying according to the way it is introduced. If introduced in line with the linguistic variations; in other words, parameters (Chomsky, 1986), learning a foreign language is not as hard as it is experienced. In other words, in EFL settings, the contents prepared for global use do not meet the need of Turkish learners of English. On the contrary, when

the rough content without the filter of the principles and parameters (commonalities and differences) between English and Turkish is serviced for the exploitation of the learners, grammar chains them. Consequently, students have to plod uphill. If teachers or educators handle the issue with this approach, referring to the structures that are hard to learn due to the variations and giving the main focus as for the time and energy on them will open the road for easy access to English.

The virtual teacher idealized above could be a great assistant for novice teachers as well. It is a fact that in the early years of the profession, novice teachers need to be supported for the pedagogical and linguistic content of their classroom instruction. Moreover, being a novice means starting the teaching profession from scratch, which also involves organizing and planning the learners' extra-curricular activities in the form of homework, project designs and internet access for synchronic and asynchronous use of the web, among other practical applications. Thus, the language teacher is supposed to have both the pedagogical content knowledge to conduct the classroom environment and the competency required to plan the learner for linguistic tasks outside the classroom. On the other hand, the teacher, as the facilitator, has to maintain and sustain the learner's interest both in and outside the class. This can be sparked by diverting learners to other environments to use the target language once they leave the classroom. However, this is not as easy as it sounds when it comes to practice, for web-based learning has not yet achieved the systematization required for the firm ground of linguistic knowledge. The existence of innumerable websites teaching English does not mean the fine-tuned language teaching material for the language learner. Moreover, it is hard to find reliable sources, for the web can be used by those who are certified to teach English as well as those who are not, which is really hard to distinguish if you are not familiar with the field of language teaching.

With the issues on the agenda, the aim of this study is to describe the attitudes of candidate teachers and students towards Web 2.0 tools. The study intends to reveal the extent these tools are considered to be important by the two parties of language learning. From a futuristic perspective, in case of unexpected natural disruptions or pandemics, for education to flow in its course without interruption, teachers created on digital platforms will become the centre of attention. Therefore, hopefully never, but to be well prepared for such times, the use of digital platforms for content is of utmost importance. Moreover, it is significant to know the extent of mental readiness for the people involved in education to be able to design the right form of blended learning. In this sense, more specifically, the research intends to reveal how students and teachers respond towards grammar teaching in virtual classrooms. The study also aims to underline the issue of cross-linguistic research to be considered while utilizing these virtual platforms. This could be possible through the inclusion of the linguistic parametric issues between Turkish and English; in this way, it aims to raise the consciousness level of the teachers for a more effective teaching experience.

This article intends to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the attitude of the candidate teachers towards Web 2.0 tools?
2. What is the achievement level of the learners who studied with Web 2.0 tools?
3. What is the attitude of the young learners towards virtual teachers?

METHOD

The Research Model

The research model is a mixed method research model in that it can provide not only qualitative but also quantitative data at the same time (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

Study Group

The participants of this research (represented with P) have been appointed according to the purposive sampling procedure. The first group is comprised of 152 A1 level learners, whose ages range from 9 to 10, studying at a state school during the 2018-2019 education term. The second group is 30 third grade candidate teachers studying at the ELT Department of an Education Faculty.

Data Collection

Four research tools have been used for this mixed-methods research in order to collect data. The first one is a survey including four sections asking about future teachers' preferences for digital tools to reveal their attitudes towards the use of ICT in the future. The survey intends to collect data for the first research question. The second research tool is a software program (see the References), which enables the users to create character-based applications in the virtual classroom. This tool has been used for the purpose of teaching the course. As for the third research tool, it is a translation test based on the two grammar items pinpointed by the researcher through focus group interviews with some language teachers. The test content was created relying on the teacher reports, in which "have got /has got-There is /There are" emerged as challenging, parametric structures for the participants' level. Two virtual teachers were created (see Fig.1.) to teach the abovementioned forms, whose Turkish equal overlaps on the same word, 'var', thus, posing a source of error. The program was loaded onto the internet platform for further use, but the piloting was conducted in the classroom. Finally, the fourth research tool is an open-ended questionnaire asking about students' attitudes towards the virtual teachers, also asking the reason why they wish/they don't wish to use the program. This tool intends to elicit answers for the third research question.



Figure 1 (a). The screenshot from the virtual classroom for “There is/There are” **(b)** The screenshot from the virtual classroom for “have got/has got”

Data Analysis

The quantitative data have been analysed with a statistical program in order to describe the distribution of student responses and success ratios. Besides, the qualitative data have been processed with the content analysis “to obtain descriptive information about a topic” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Since the research proceeded in line with the questions asked to the participants in a survey, the inductive approach theory has been used to analyse the data obtained from the responses, thus putting the answers into categories as stated in the “Findings” part. Besides, a descriptive analysis has been made to identify the ratios related to the distribution of the participant attitudes towards the questions in the survey.

FINDINGS

Research question 1 asks about the attitude of future teachers towards the use of Web 2.0 tools in their practices. The survey is comprised of four sections, the first question asking the types of the digital tools the participants use during their micro-teaching practices. The most widespread uses of these tools are either while teaching a form (e.g., animation tools, mind-mapping tools, etc.), or the ones they use for evaluation and homework (e.g., quiz makers, video makers, etc.).

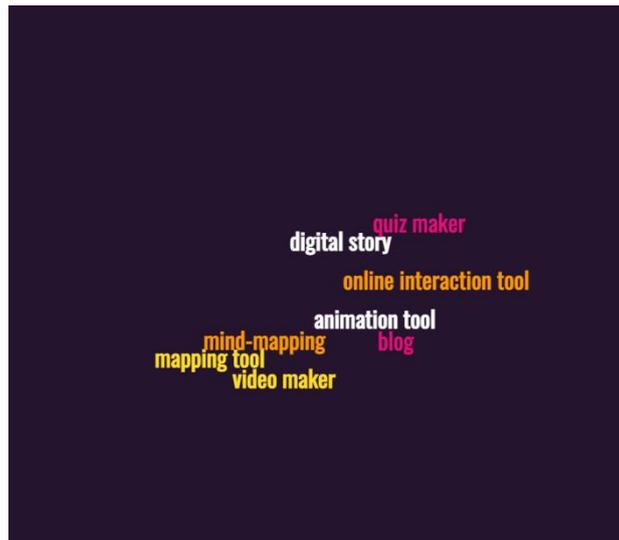


Figure 2. The most commonly used Web 2.0 tools for micro-teaching

Table 1. Distribution of the candidate teachers’ attitudes towards integrating Web 2.0 tools into grammar teaching at a course time

Distribution of the candidate teachers’ attitudes towards integrating Web 2.0 tools into grammar teaching at a course time	less than 50 % of the course time allocated for grammar teaching	80 %
	more than 50 % of the course time allocated for grammar	20 %

The second section of the survey linked to Research Question 1 asks to what extent teachers are planning to utilize web 2.0 tools during their instruction. A great majority of the teacher candidates (80%) are planning to use this opportunity by allocating more than 50 % of the class contact hours for teaching. The other group, who thinks that the integration will be less than half during the grammar instruction (20%), might be under the influence of their past teachers as the following statement of a participant suggests:

“In the past, teachers used to teach with limited means. I learnt perfect grammar from my teacher without technology.” P.30

The other possibility is that they might be preparing for the conditions that these tools will not be available during their practice:

“We don't have to use digital tools; we may well use other materials like flashcards or the blackboard itself” P.17

Table 2. Distribution of the candidate teachers’ attitudes towards teaching grammar only with Web 2.0 tools

Distribution rates	80%	15%	20%	10%
	No, because...	No, but...	Yes, because...	Yes, but...

On the other hand, when it comes to the third question of the survey linked to Research Question 1, asking if the participants can teach grammar only with Web 2.0 tools, 30 % of the population think that they can:

“Yes, it is possible. Because there are so many options to teach, and they will be enough.” P.2

“It will be much easier to prepare practical works for teaching grammar.” P.6

“I think it can be done via digital tools, especially for young learners. Formulated grammar instruction with pen and paper may be useful for only a small group of adult learners, preparing for certain types of exams.” P.27

“I think I can if I use them effectively because children like digital things.P.17

“Yes, if teachers know how to use digital tools effectively, they are a great way for teaching grammar. Teachers are expected to teach grammar inductively. Digital tools allow students to understand and analyse authentic samples of grammar use and see how grammar contributes to social functions of communication in various genres.” P.21

However, despite the positive attitude towards using the tool, a group of participants have some reservation (10 %):

“Only digital tools may not be enough; that’s why, we should use other materials.” P.9

In addition to the given responses, some participants think that the digital world is not enough on its own (70 %), and that teachers and other components of education must be included:

“I would not use Web 2.0 tools all that often, because while they sound good in theory, my observation is that students (including ages above 15) react better to physical situations. For this question, of course if we were limited to digital tools as it was during the pandemic, teachers could teach grammar using only digital tools. It just would not be ideal” P.14

“Of course no, without it, we can teach, too, because in the old times, there were no digital tools, and teachers could teach” P.10

“I believe I can, but I don't think it is suitable for all the children in the classroom, for they all don't have the same meta-cognitive skills.” P.12

“Explanation creates the base for micro teaching, so tools themselves are only there for aiding the process.” P.2

“We need to apply the grammar rules in a deductive way” P.13

“I don't think so. I strongly believe that using grammar includes speaking. That is why, I am planning to teach grammar through reading and discussion groups.” P.20

“I prefer old methods; I am not for digitalization.” P.22

“I don't think so. I also produce handmade materials for my students to teach grammar.” P.23

“Teachers should participate in the teaching physically, considering their students' needs in class.” P.26

Some participants choose to take support from the digital tools instead of using them as the main source (15%):

“Teaching grammar is not something easy; however, it could be supported by digital tools.” P.4

“I am not good at digital tools; however, if someone can use it effectively, it can be enough.” P.18

Table 3. Distribution of the candidate teachers’ attitudes towards teaching grammar without using digital tools

Distribution rates	70%	20%	20%	10%
	Yes, because...	Yes, but...	No, because...	No, but...

The fourth question of the survey asks if grammar instruction can be given without digital tools. 70% of the teacher candidates responded positively, also giving their reasons for thinking in this way:

“How did people do it for literally hundreds of years? Also, grammar is something that can be integrated into other skills rather than being actively taught, so the need for explicit tools decreases.” P.2

“We can teach grammar without using digital tools. Before digital tools came to stage, grammar had been taught in traditional ways. Therefore, there are other ways to teach it.” P.9

“I can teach grammar without using digital tools. For instance, I can provide listening, reading texts, etc. I think it is easier for us to think in terms of teaching grammar without using digital tools even though most of us are considered Generation Z. It is easier because this was how our teacher taught us grammar.” P.12

“Of course, I can. Earlier, there were no Web 2.0 tools, but people could learn grammar. When we consider from a realistic view, many village schools don’t have opportunities to use Web 2.0 tools. So, it is important to use discussions, role plays, reading activities while teaching grammar.” P.20

20% of the participants remarked that they could teach grammar without digital platforms, but technology would be a better support for the courses:

“I can, but I'm not sure if it will be effective because students will expect something different.” P.5

“I can, but using digital tools can be better for teaching grammar because there is a lot of rich content on digital platforms.” P.16

“I can, but it will not be effective; it will be boring.” P.17

“I can, but with digital tools, it would be better. We shouldn't only focus on form; instead, we should teach it from a meaning-based, communicative perspective. Digital tools provide data for inductive teaching.” P.21

On the other hand, 21% of the participants chose to stick to digital tools on the grounds that learning becomes more permanent and enjoyable when ICT is integrated into the curriculum:

“We need to use digital platforms for permanent and effective knowledge.” P.13

“Otherwise, courses will be so boring for students.” P.15

“Web 2.0 tools make the job easier both for teachers and for students.” P.26

“Teaching functions our learners would utilize in real-life situations is the emphasis of our curriculum, which is mainly based on the Communicative Approach. For this purpose, drama and physical materials could also be implemented. However, digital tools can provide many possibilities for the teacher and the learner, which will make the process easier.” P.27

The second research question asks whether the virtual teacher created with a Web 2.0 tool was effective in teaching grammar to young learners. The discussion under the light of data analysis is given below:

Table 4. Distribution of the Student Achievement Level

Points	0-2,5	2,5-5	5-7,5	7,5-10
Rates	41%	31%	24%	4%

As it is mentioned in the Methodology part, the third research tool is a translation test applied to the participants to see the achievement levels after the course. According to the test results, 45% of the students got points higher than the average, and 31 % of the participants were able to achieve average success (see Table 4).

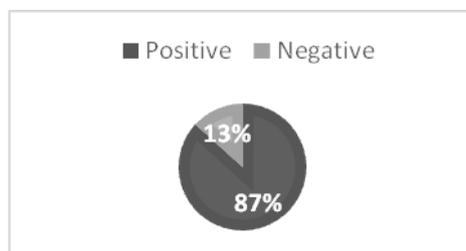


Figure 3. Distribution of the Student Attitudes to the Program

Lastly, as an answer to the third research question, according to the descriptive analysis results (see Figure 3), 86,8 % of the participants showed a positive attitude towards virtual teachers, while 13.2% did not find the application interesting and effective. The majority of the students’ attitudes and ideas about using a virtual teacher for practising the language proved to be positive according to the results elicited from the sample qualitative data (See Appendix 1). At a closer inspection, the more successful students have turned out to have positive attitudes towards virtual teachers, which can be interpreted as that the adoption of a virtual teacher could boost the success rates of the learners.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

In line with the responses to the first research question, "What is the attitude of the candidate teachers towards Web 2.0 tools?", it might be possible to claim that candidate teachers have positive attitudes towards using Web 2.0 tools in their classrooms. According to the responses, a great majority of the teachers would like to utilize them in their lessons. It is an undeniable fact that this plan may fail once they start the profession when the classroom context requires them to act otherwise; however, even the teaching program they have this way reveals their cognition that Web 2.0 tools will be on their agenda. This case is in line with the findings by Tezci (2009), who states that according to the research he conducted, teachers in Turkey turned out to have positive attitudes towards the use of computers and technology at schools. As a more recent study, Raygan & Moradkhani (2022, p. 1803) state, "Effective technology integration requires EFL teachers to have a positive attitude toward technological advancements." The rationale behind this lies in the fact that it is a need for language teachers to apply technology to their instruction.

As for the second research question, related to the contribution of virtual teachers to language learning, it was revealed that virtual teachers can improve the linguistic knowledge of the students as supplementary teachers in need. Secondly, implications of cross-linguistic research have obviously contributed to the design of the learning models, as the two parametric structures seem to have been internalized by the majority of the students. It can be seen that almost a quarter of the student population remains under the expected achievement levels of the test; however, it should be borne in mind that once ICT is incorporated into the daily routines of the learners, it may become part of autonomous learning. Besides, if such a routine is systematized and designed with a syllabus that is parallel to the classroom experience of the students, the learning will be further improved and controlled by an external mechanism. It is a fact that ICT has the power to change the way and the content of what is learnt (Cowie & Jones, 2009). For this reason, today's teachers and those of the future need to combine technology with their classroom instruction and other practices in an efficient and significant way (Luke & Britten, 2007). While setting the standard for efficiency, the teacher has to observe such concerns as the personality traits, knowledge level and learning styles of the learner for the purpose of providing the coaching and scaffolding (Yang & Chen, 2007) when necessary. Teachers can make use of the support from virtual classrooms to be prepared by the INSET (In-service Teacher Education) providers and divert their students to learn English as a supplementary course in this environment. Considering the benefits of technology, the need for future language teachers to be prepared for the classroom with technology arises as suggested by Wildner (2000) because, in case of an emergency, these teachers can replace the real ones if the content of the curriculum for the students is provided for such a teaching system.

The results for the final research question about the attitude of young learners to virtual teachers indicate that students can happily welcome digital platforms, for they offer an interesting language learning experience. According to the research findings, the virtual teacher created did the job of teaching successfully as it can be seen from the test results, and findings show that most of the learners have a positive attitude towards using

Web 2.0 tools in all learning platforms. What is important in this case is that, as stated by Haugestad & Keeling (2023), if digital tools are used extremely, they may lead to a decrease in motivation and hamper learning effects after some time. This points out to a requirement of a careful consideration about their functions and their incorporation into language education. As a further support for this view, the research conducted with ELT candidate teachers by Çoban & Vardar (2021) discusses the negative and positive aspects of distance education for attitudes as follows:

... the most positive aspects of distance education are that it provides time and space flexibility, reviewing lessons by recordings, affordability, comfort, and sharing a wide range of resources, while the prominent negative aspects are technical problems, applied courses, lack of social interaction, insufficient teaching methods and techniques, low participation, assessment and evaluation, workload, health problems and low motivation (p. 215).

In the light of the present research, it is obvious that current trends in language teaching have brought about the use of technology both in and outside the classroom. However, the teacher, as the central decision maker, needs to decide how and where to use this vital component of modern life. On the other hand, for less experienced teachers, a large repertoire is required for effective integration of ICT, which can be gained after some years. In this sense, the novice teacher can benefit from this tool both to update his/her methodological knowledge through the sample 'how to teach' lessons, and to improve ICT competence by using and creating materials thanks to technology. Moreover, students could be diverted to these platforms to utilize linguistic content when they are not with their teachers. It is a fact that nothing can replace the real teacher; virtual teachers can only be effective in the form of blended learning and can help teachers as supplementary aids; however, the fact that they can function without time and place constraints makes them an important component of learning. Therefore, the model proposed in this article has duality: firstly, it aims to support the teacher's language education in the classroom in terms of linguistic content, for the learner will be diverted to a meticulously planned and well-disciplined learning environment. Secondly, it intends to guide and update the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and with the current issues in language teaching. Technology will obviously help the teacher both as an aid to classroom teaching and as an efficient tool for homework and extra-curricular activities in the early years of the profession.

As a conclusion, according to the findings of this research, the majority of teacher candidates do not find the use of Web 2.0 tools as the primary source for language teaching; rather, they think that these tools can be used as very effective means to engage the students into the task of learning. However, if designed in line with the needs of the learners as a curriculum component, ICT-based language teaching in virtual classrooms as supplementary activities outside the classroom can ease the teacher's job, which most teachers seem to be unaware of (Ripamonti, 2010). For EFL contexts, the solution of blended learning would work best to meet the needs of the learner outside the classroom. Technology integration into language teaching requires the involvement of three parties: students, teachers, and curriculum designers. It is crucial to consider the readiness of these three parties while making decisions. As suggested by Cabangcala et al. (2022) who conducted a study to find out the attitudes of language learners about online education, it is pointed out that technological competence level of the student

is directly related to how learners perceive online education. Besides, the fact is that teachers' attitudes either pave the way for ICT applications or hinder them. However, considering the past four years, one cannot help asking "what if schools had not adapted quickly to the transition period for distance education and provided the technological infrastructure?" To encapsulate, in case of potential disruptive experiences such as epidemics or other unexpected disasters, technology will be the determinant factor in the future.

SUGGESTIONS

The education world needs preparation, planning and action for any situation that digital world comes to use. It is a fact that real classrooms are irreplaceable due to the social context, synergy and collaboration they offer, but in case of a substitute, we need this facility, and it is high time we laid emphasis on this issue.

When it comes to language teaching, one of the disciplines utilizing the digital world widely, technology should be on the agenda of the initial teacher education programs. Future teachers need to improve their technical skills to produce and create materials with the help of technology. Technology is there so that we can exploit all the facilities offered to us. However, it should be borne in mind that every teacher, every student, and every class is unique. Teachers are the tailors who cut the cloth to dress the unique learner, thus using technology for the needs of a unique class. In this sense, as long as teachers are "the creators", not "the consumers" of the digital world, they can meet the changing needs of learners; therefore, they can become digital material developers when a need arises. For this to realize, teacher candidates should be updated with the programs whose main focus is the use of technology in language teaching. As it is highlighted in a recent study by Aşık et al. (2020), language teacher education institutions in Turkey require more ways to develop specific strategies for ICT integration. In addition, computer literacy should be on the agenda of the In-Service Professional Development Programs; particularly, for the language teachers who do not have enough technical skills to utilize web-based applications.

ETHICAL TEXT

In this article, the journal writing rules, publication principles, research and publication ethics, and journal ethical rules were followed. The responsibility belongs to the author (s) for any violations that may arise regarding the article. The data of the present study were collected during the 2018-2019 Fall term.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Sample Responses of the Students (Translated into English by the Researcher)

Would you like to study English with the teacher in the video? Why/ Why not?

1. Yes. I would like to, because our teacher just writes on the board and lets us write them down.
2. Yes. It is amusing, I have learnt better in this way.
3. Yes, I want to use it as I want to improve my English.
4. Yes. I can learn to speak with this program.
5. Yes. I want to learn English better.
6. Yes. It is entertaining and instructional.
7. Yes. I want to use it.
8. Yes. I want to use it because the teacher will help me with my lessons.
9. No. It is boring.
10. No. I couldn't understand the speaker.