Language learning and Cultural Diversity in the Educational System

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Introduction

In the modern world it is nearly impossible to find a country where all population is made up from only one ethnic or cultural group. Latvia is no exception. Multiculturalism is still a relatively new concept in Latvia, although we have observed the increasing public interest towards multicultural principles and values, including their application in education. Important aspects of multicultural education have been to some degree overlooked. It refers, first of all, to the inclusion and fair representation of different ethnic groups in the national education system.

The twenty-first century with its rapidly changing socio-economic and cultural situation has introduced the necessity for changes in higher education in Latvia as well. Nowadays the development of society has broadened the meaning and quality of education due to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). In education we are affected by the influence of modern technologies such as computers, mobile phones, the Internet and by accompanying attitudes that technology can offer easy solutions. The prevalent assumption appears to be that as technology can solve the problem of entertainment or communication, it must surely be able to solve the problem of education equally easily. New technology is seen, in short, as some kind of panacea, which makes education quicker and easier. However, the problem is how to attend carefully to all aspects of the change process including interpersonal and social areas to ensure that the human elements in the change process are being dealt with as well as the technical and to discover the ways of close cooperation between an instructor from one side and the knowledge consumer from another one. It is a vital problem because in the recent years the most dramatic changes have come about as a result of developments in 'Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT), a form of CALL (Warschauer, 2002, p.1). In this connection a question may arise: May this new form of CALL raise the students' motivation for studying languages, in particular, foreign languages regardless of cultural diversities? This question, first of all, should be addressed to the so-called 'non-language students', i.e. the students studying the natural sciences and technical subjects, not the Arts.

The purpose of the study was, first, to analyse the theoretical approaches and students' attitude to language learning in new circumstances, the EU community, the cultural diversity and intercultural communicative competence and, second, to determine the students' attitude to the potential and prospective Network-Based Vocational English course.

Taking into account the above-mentioned basic question our research attempted to answer a range of questions:

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- What is the students' attitude to cultural diversity, employment in the EU, and first and second foreign language learning in the context of profession?
- Will the non-language students be interested in studying network-based vocational English?
- How to improve the non-language students' motivation for vocational English language learning?
- Do university students possess the basic computer literacy to carry out the requirements of the vocational network-based English course?
- What do the students, as consumers of knowledge, need vocational English for?
- What are the learning preferences and priorities?

We begin with a brief outline of the theoretical assumption on which the investigation was based followed by a description of the method, a description of the results and some conclusions.

Theoretical background

Language learning

Language learning involves a number of different skills, for example, the traditionally recognized skills of listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing. In addition, more recent definitions of proficiency in a second language involve competence above and beyond grammatical or syntactic competence to include discourse competence (e.g. issues of coherence and rhetorical organization) and several types of pragmatic competence such as sociolinguistic competence and sociocultural competence [Canale and Swain, 1980]. The notion of communicative competence described in Canale and Swain's influential model (Canale and Swain, 1980] entails four competences, which are referred to as grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. The model focuses exclusively on standardized native speaker norms.

However, shortly before, in 1971, at least one important thought appeared when Dell Hymes, an American sociolinguist, coined the term 'communicative competence' and insisted on the social appropriateness of the language use [Hymes, 1971, p.10]. During the 1980s communicative competence became the buzzword of the language teaching profession. As Kern and Warschauer wrote, 'what needed to be taught was no longer just linguistic competence but also sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence ' [Kern and Warschauer, 2002, p.5]. Traditional language teaching methods and materials are characterized as concentrating on the development of linguistic competence, almost to the exclusion of the other elements

Personal and professional competence focuses on the necessity to develop cooperation and dialogue skills in practical classes to improve analytical abilities for thinking, discussing and critically assessing their language competence to achieve educational goals.

However, in a *sociocognitive* approach, learning is viewed not just in terms of changes in individuals' cognitive structures but also in terms of the social structure of learners'

discourse and activity [Crook, 1994, p.78]. Contemporary theories of communicative competence provide language teachers with knowledge and guidelines that can empower them to make informed decisions about the learners' needs. Nowadays communicative competence is formed as a result of professional orientation of the subject, as provided by social experience and direction of values.

The absence of a united, clearly structured, theoretically grounded and practically developed approach to language acquisition and improvement (native, second or foreign) in higher schools is considered to be a disturbing factor in attaining a high quality level of academic language and efficiency of learning/teaching process. The necessity to raise the quality level of the Latvian, first of all, and English language skills, used by students, made us look for the relevant approach and linguistic – didactic model, testing it from the point of view of the students and the teacher. The cognitive constructive approach is efficient in language acquisition in higher school. It is evaluated according to certain criteria. For example, studies can be constructive if students acquire knowledge and skills themselves, on their own, connecting this acquisition process with empiric environment; if new knowledge is based on previous knowledge; if students set their goals themselves and so on.

Thus, the cognitive constructive approach practiced in the work with university students, is realized as a strategy to achieve a high quality level of academic language and to ensure efficiency in the learning/teaching process.

Competence of responsible action could be singled out from all personal and professional competence considered as important for each present student and specialist. That is the most actual and useful personal competence. Responsibility as a feature of a person's character should be treated as one of the basic qualities of personality. The development of a personality's responsibility, i.e. equipping a person for life, activities, behaving in accordance with accepted standards, choosing one or another solution with freedom and responsibility, is becoming increasingly topical.

Network-based learning

The computer communication technologies centred on the Internet have provided new frontiers for educational needs as well. Education has to consider the implementations and opportunities offered by the new technological environment for learning. Theoretical foundations for network-based learning are *social* as well as *cognitive* in nature, and uses of computer-mediated communication have focused on creating discourse communities. Kern and Warschauer describe a form of CALL, network-based language teaching (NBLT) as 'language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks' [Kern & Warschauer, 2002, p.1] One may say if the *cognitive* paradigm engendered research that looked at the development of individual processes, strategies and competences then the *sociocognitive* paradigm and an emphasis on learning through computer networks have brought about a focus on the way that discourse and discourse communities develop during use of computer networks.

Cultural diversity

The analysis of psycho-cultural [for example Chomsky, N.,1975] and socio-cultural theories [for instance Bandura, A., 1993] allows assessing communication as a type of human activity, directed towards the formation of mutual cooperation, including a wide scope of ideas pertaining to the notion of bilateral participation. One of the most challenging aspects of including diversity in teaching materials is the balance between reflecting the complexity of social reality, with often-existing patterns of inequality, and the ideal of a multicultural, tolerant society with equal opportunities for all groups. Equality entails the discussion of cultural differences and social inequalities. Discrepancies and problems, potentialities and impossibilities in the multicultural society are recognized and explored in the study materials (Golubeva, M and Krupnikova,M., 2004). The study characterizes strategies used in the process of learning a language. It concludes that a learning strategy, communicative strategy and social strategy have an impact on improvement of communicative competence.

Diversity mainstreaming is a policy principle that is being implemented in several countries in the EU and outside it. Mainstreaming consists of recognizing cultural and ethnic diversity as a norm in society. The application of the principle of diversity mainstreaming in national education systems is twofold: to improve the equality of access to education for different groups in society and to assert the positive value of diversity in society. The principle of positive recognition of diversity is central to liberal policies when applied to multicultural societies. Positive recognition of diversity in national education systems is required by a number of international agreements. Latvia is a multi-cultural country and is inhabited by people of different ethnic backgrounds: Latvians (58%), Russians (30%), Byelorussians (4%), Ukrainians (2,5%), Poles (2,5%), Lithuanians (1,5%), Jews (0,5%) and other nationalities [www.policy.lv : social integration].

The main requirement for the implementation of intercultural and human rights education as it is described in the various international documents, is that professionals working in education have developed appropriate professional knowledge, skills and attitudes for international understanding, co-operation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms.[Batelaan and Cooman, 1998].

The emphasis on the motivation of the language learning and the identifying of the needs, learning styles and preferences is important because after getting feedback from students a researcher to some degree can gauge the students' activity in the potential and prospective network-based course. As known the term motivation has been used on different levels. Here we are speaking about 'instrumental, not integrative' motivation which focuses on the vocational purposes i.e. in order to be able to 'read current articles in a professional field 'or to apply language knowledge to it [Stevick, Earl W., 1976, p.48].

This article takes the position that we should take into account the different aspects of competence and motivation. As for technology (in education and in modern foreign language teaching in particular) it should not merely replace current practice for the sake

of novelty, but must contribute to it and improve it. This is particularly true given the fact that adaptation to technology is often time-consuming and difficult. This up-to-date NBLT technological environment can serve as a catalyzing tool for the motivation of students.

Methods

The research method we used at RTU was similar across groups and included a Network-Based Vocational English Course (NBVEC) questionnaire that contained sections: a) attitude to the EU language aspects; b) computer access information; c) vocational English needs; d) Information–Communication Technology (ICT) needs. This questionnaire shows students the ways in which (ICT) can contribute to foreign language teaching and indicates the areas which the teacher must deal with besides the technology, i.e. with aspects of the classroom, of methodology to ensure maximum educational benefit.

The aim of Computer Access Information and ICT/ODL is to collect the most crucial information about the potential students of the Vocational Network-Based English Course, their vocational proficiency, learning preferences and computer access and then to identify the level of basic computer literacy and preferred style of open distance learning. Vocational English is offered to identify the special English requirements of the prospective students of computer-based courses such as: vocational English proficiency, purpose of use and learning preferences. This will help the investigator to design the structures and functionalities of the future course to best suit the vocational English needs of the learners

The subjects consisted of sixty-four undergraduate students at RTU who were the first and second year learners of Bachelor English as a second language. In the research we chose classes that reflect three different faculties and two years of study i.e. eight groups all together. The students represent three faculties: Data Information Technology Faculty (DITF) with a prospective specialisation in hardware and software; Electrical Engineering Faculty (EEF) with a prospective specialisation in energy; and Building Faculty (BF) with a prospective specialisation in building constructions.

The study at Latvia University (LU) includes such methods of qualitative research as observations of students and interviews with foreign language lecturers. It is based on the survey (2005–2006) of students and professors because students' opinions about knowledge and the ways in which to get it can differ from lecturers' points of view. Consequently the choice of pedagogical model of interaction is a very significant factor in providing high quality of studies. The research has been conducted at LU among the students of the Economic faculty and the lecturers teaching them foreign languages such as Business English, Latvian, Russian and German. Qualitative analysis is used to interpret the results. The difference between the old and the new paradigms in foreign language teaching was analysed taking into account the terms of reproducing vs. producing as well as knowing vs. applying. Moreover, several strategies for problem solution were explored such as problem space, working backwards, reasoning by analogy etc.

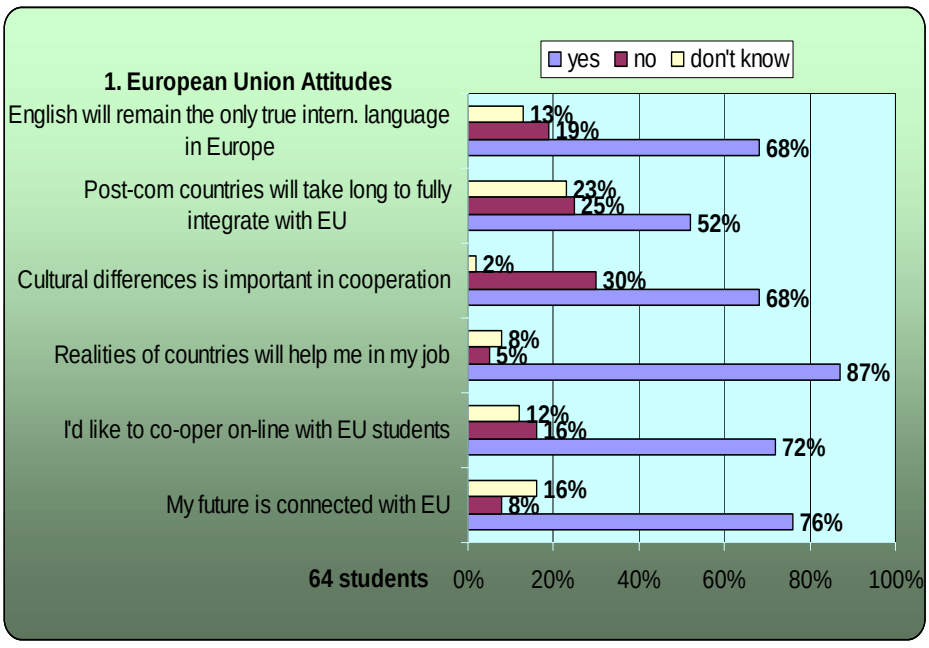
Results and discussions

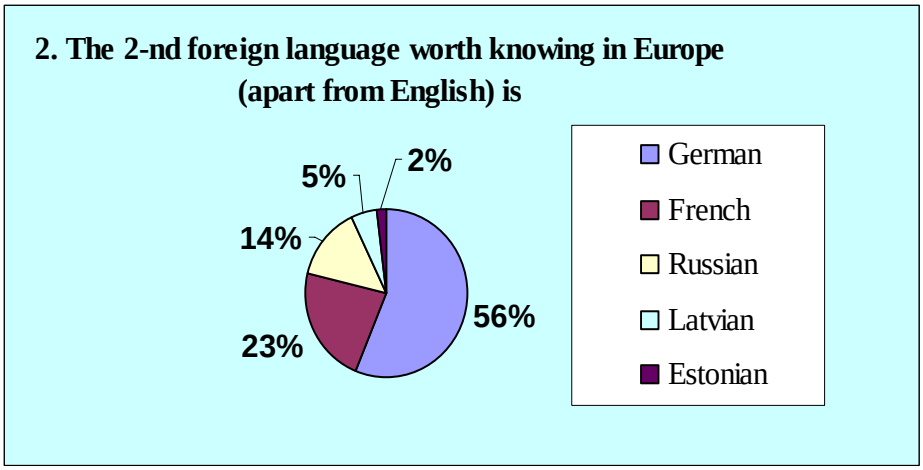
The results of study at RTU are shown at the diagrams below. The questionnaire was given to all present students in a group.

Computer literacy among the subjects varied, from the highly experienced user (students from DITF, especially sophomores) to the near novice (students from BF).
The students' proficiency in English varied, but all had passed at least the secondary school centralized examination.

After receiving feedback from students we decided to maximize the replies and design a Picture of Motivation combining the most frequently mentioned findings among the students' replies. As a result, we have come to the next decision.

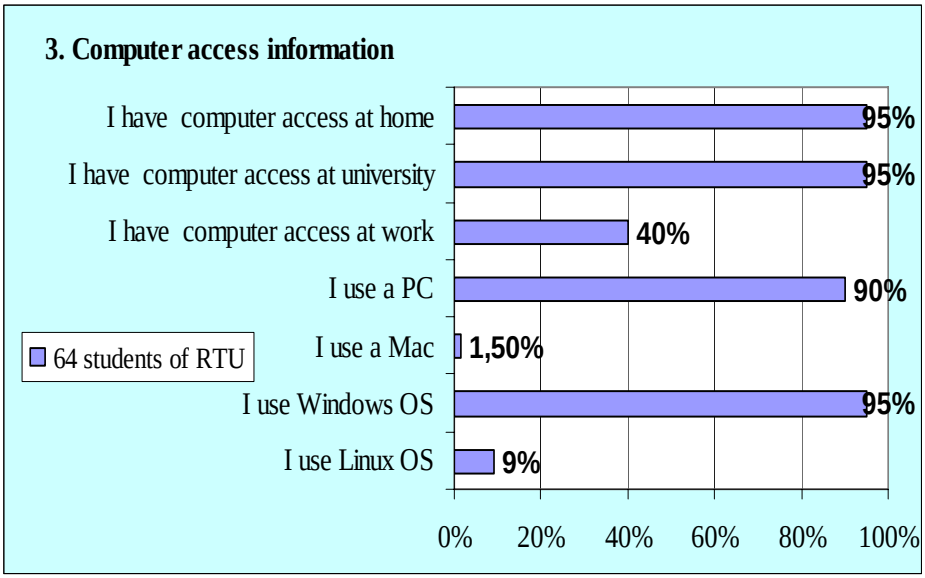
Picture of Motivation
I am a young male, aged 20, who has been studying natural sciences and technical subjects at RTU. First of all I would like to express my attitude to the EU language aspects: without any doubt knowing the realities of other EU countries in the context of my vocation will help me in my job [yes/87%]. Definitely I see my future employment closely connected with EU [yes/76%]. I would like to co-operate on-line with students from other EU countries [yes/72%]. English will remain the only true international language in Europe [yes/68%]. Cultural diversities between countries are an important obstacle in cooperation within the EU [yes/68%]. The second foreign language worth knowing (apart from English) is German [56%]. The data is shown below:

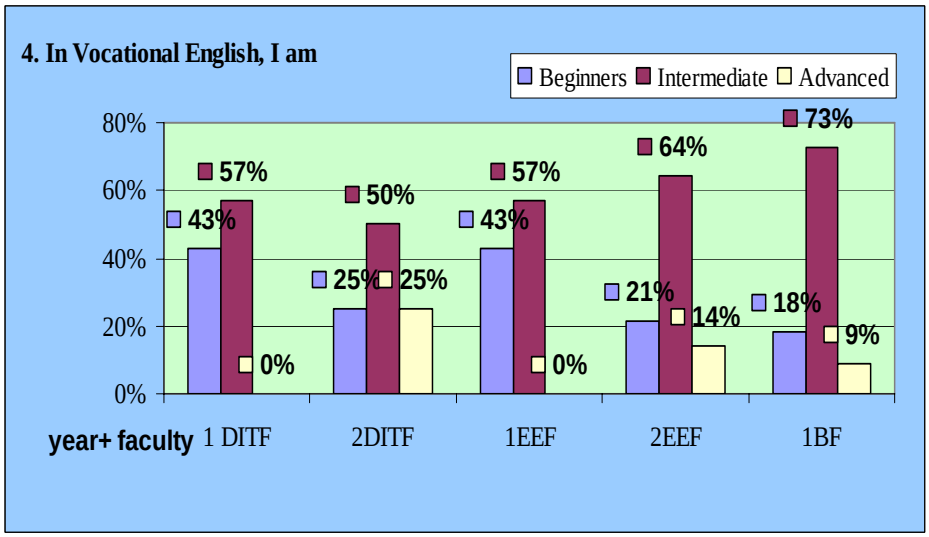


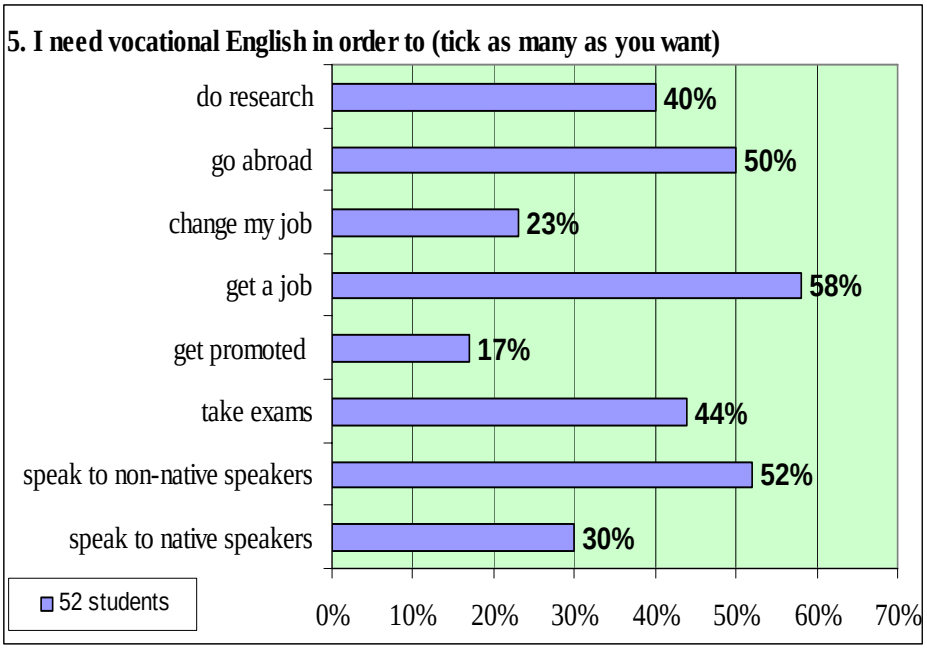


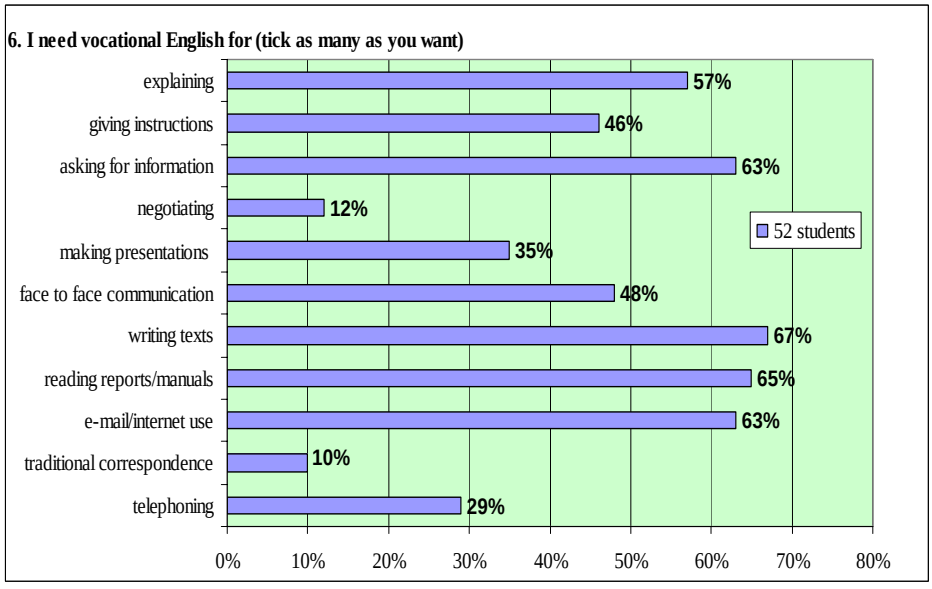
I have a PC [90%] computer and access both at home [95%] and at university [95%]. At home I use Windows operating system [95%]. My vocational needs are as follows: I need Vocational English in order to get a job [58%] and mostly for writing texts and reading reports/manuals [65%]. In the course I mostly want to communicate with others and read texts [62%]. My course priority is speaking [65%]. When I learn I like to translate [60%] and watch video [69%]. My favourite exercises are matching [44%] and multiple choices [44%].

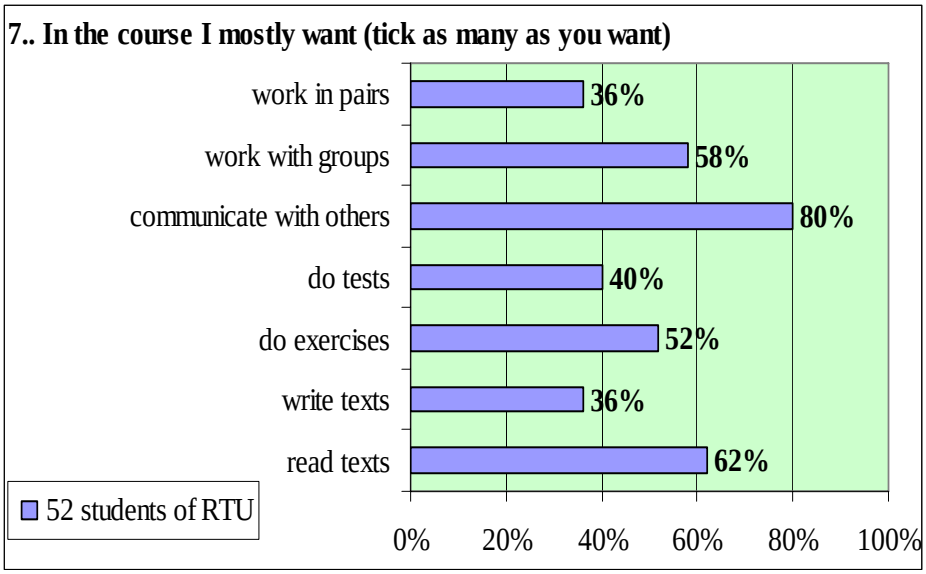
Now I want to say a few words about NBVEC. When online learning English I like to use chats [53%] and, one may be surprised, standard exercises [53%] and to communicate online with another course student [56%]. At last I want my work to be assessed often [37%], by a computer [45%] (NB: not by a teacher38%), with marks and descriptions [37%]. My total need to take NBVEC is medium [61%].
The detailed data is shown in the diagrams below:

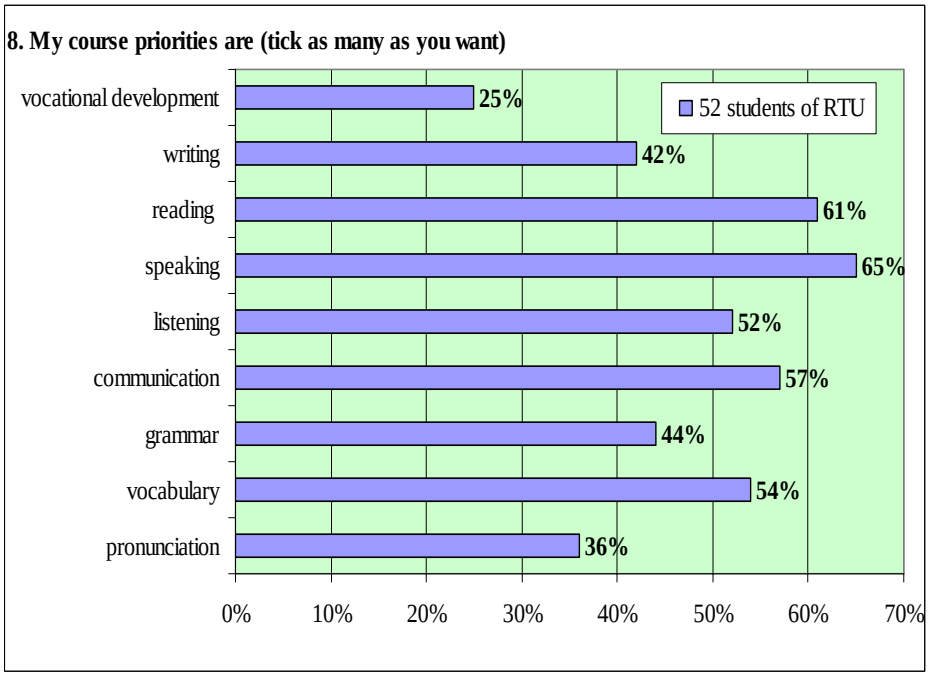

3. Computer access information
I have computer access at home
I have computer access at university
I have computer access at work
I use a PC
I use a Mac
I use Windows OS
I use Linux OS
64 students of RTU
95%
95%
40%
90%
1,50%
95%
9%
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

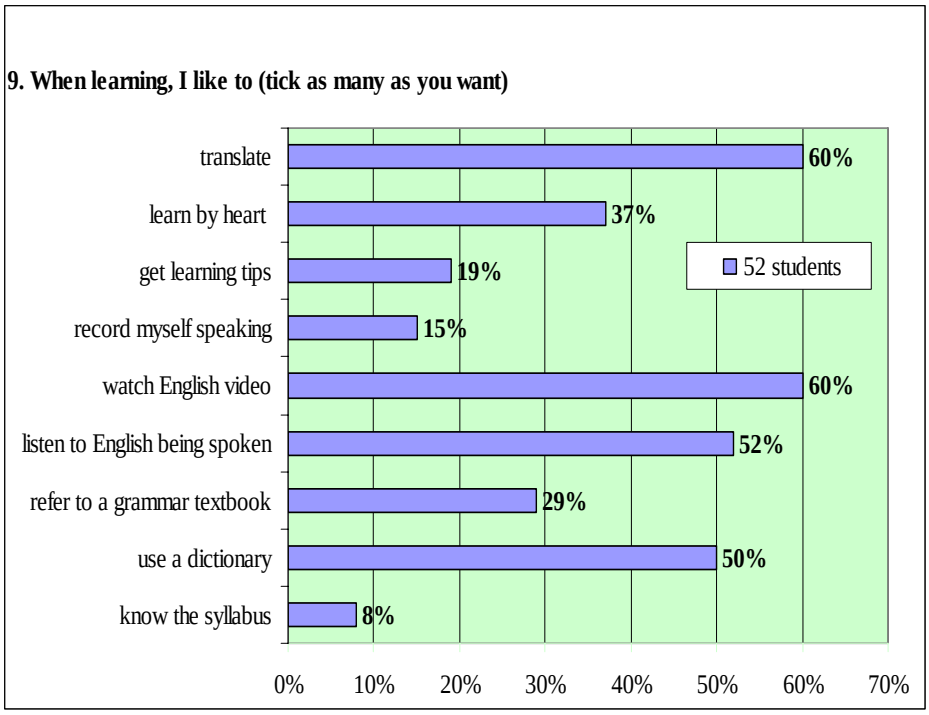

4. In Vocational English, I am
Beginners
Intermediate
Advanced
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
43%
57%
0%
25%
50%
25%
43%
57%
0%
21%
64%
14%
18%
73%
9%
year+ faculty
1 DITF
2DITF
1EEF
2EEF
1BF

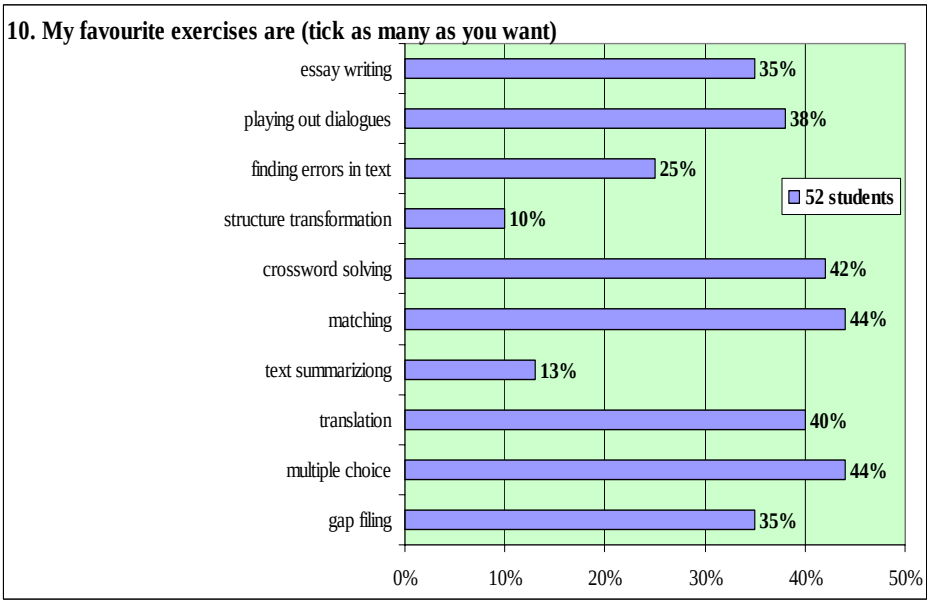

5. I need vocational English in order to (tick as many as you want)
do research
40%
go abroad
50%
change my job
23%
get a job
58%
get promoted
17%
take exams
44%
speak to non-native speakers
52%
speak to native speakers
30%
52 students
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%

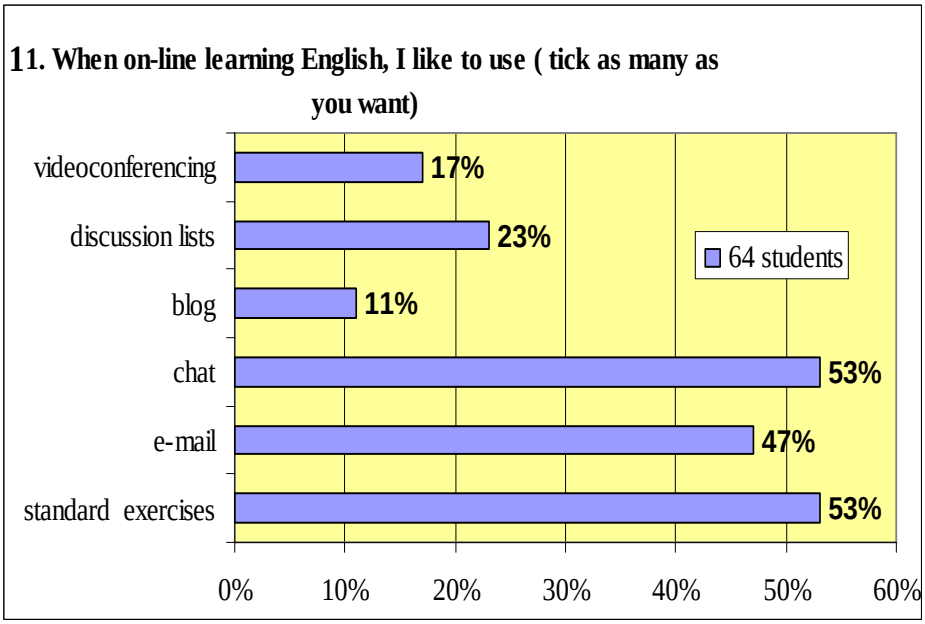

6. I need vocational English for (tick as many as you want)
explaining
57%
giving instructions
46%
asking for information
63%
negotiating
12%
making presentations
35%
face to face communication
48%
writing texts
67%
reading reports/manuals
65%
e-mail/internet use
63%
traditional correspondence
10%
telephoning
29%
52 students
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%

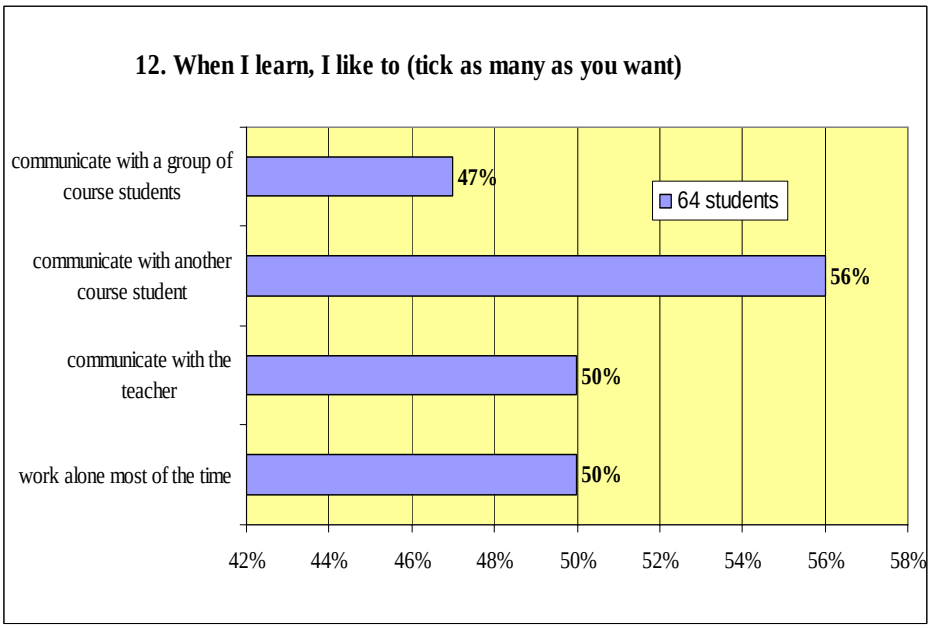

7.. In the course I mostly want (tick as many as you want)
work in pairs
work with groups
communicate with others
do tests
do exercises
write texts
read texts
36%
58%
80%
40%
52%
36%
62%
52 students of RTU
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

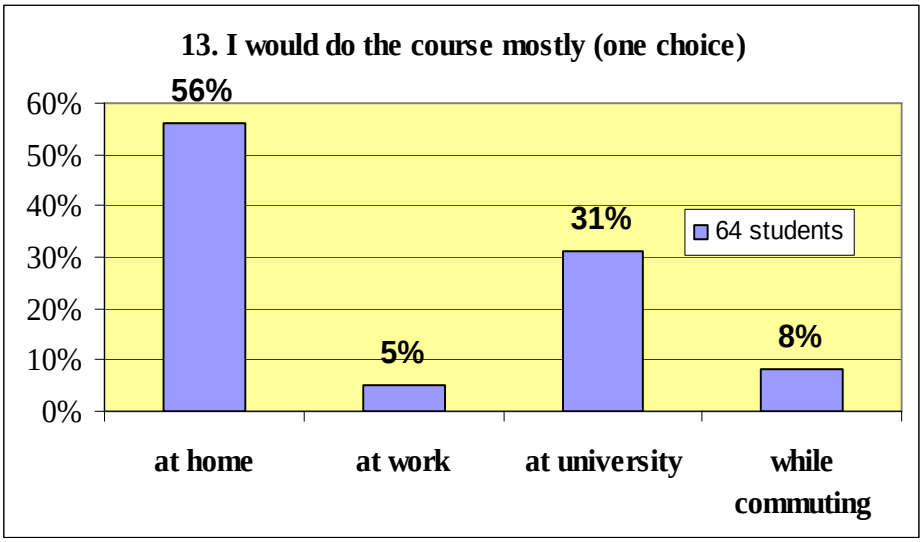

8. My course priorities are (tick as many as you want)
vocational development
writing
reading
speaking
listening
communication
grammar
vocabulary
pronunciation
25%
42%
61%
65%
52%
57%
44%
54%
36%
52 students of RTU
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%

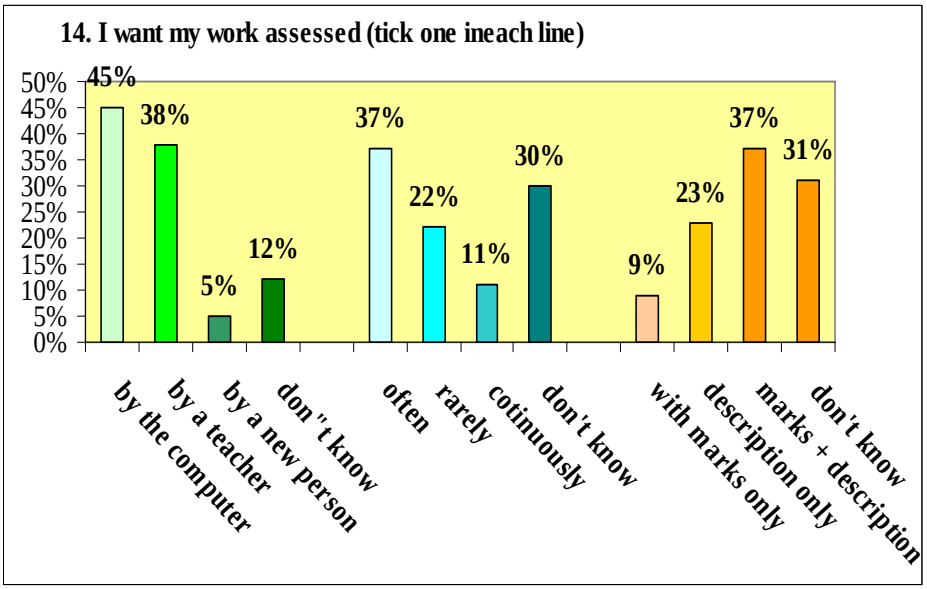

9. When learning, I like to (tick as many as you want)
translate
learn by heart
get learning tips
record myself speaking
watch English video
listen to English being spoken
refer to a grammar textbook
use a dictionary
know the syllabus
60%
37%
19%
15%
60%
52%
29%
50%
8%
52 students
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%

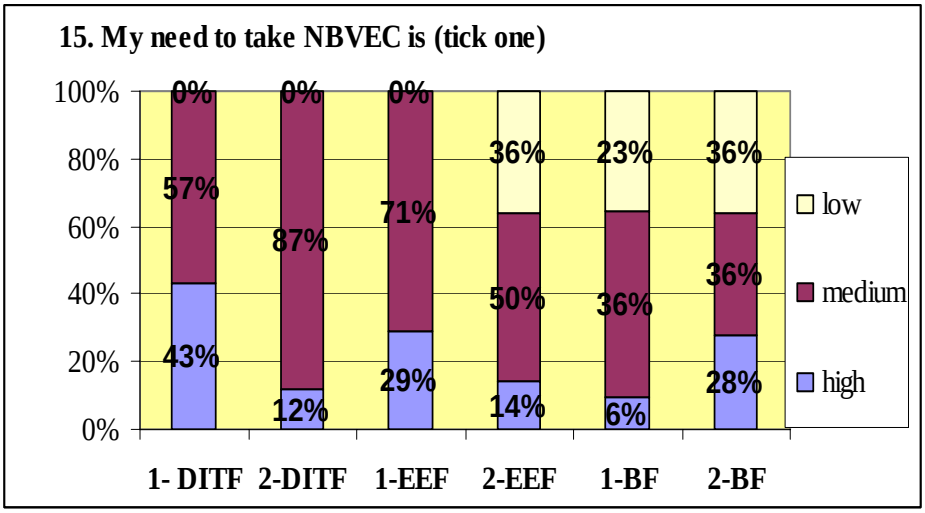

10. My favourite exercises are (tick as many as you want)
essay writing
playing out dialogues
finding errors in text
structure transformation
crossword solving
matching
text summariziong
translation
multiple choice
gap filing
35%
38%
25%
10%
42%
44%
13%
40%
44%
35%
52 students
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%

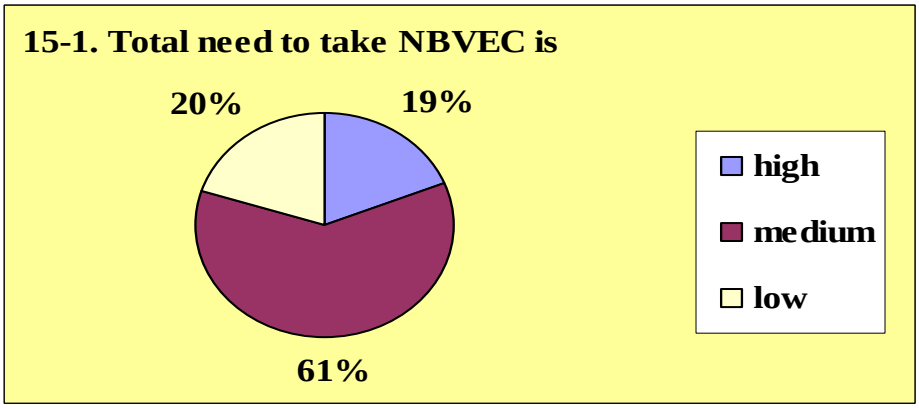

11. When on-line learning English, I like to use (tick as many as you want)
videoconferencing
discussion lists
blog
chat
e-mail
standard exercises
17%
23%
11%
53%
47%
53%
64 students
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%


12. When I learn, I like to (tick as many as you want)
communicate with a group of course students
communicate with another course student
communicate with the teacher
work alone most of the time
47%
56%
50%
50%
64 students
42%
44%
46%
48%
50%
52%
54%
56%
58%


13. I would do the course mostly (one choice)
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
56%
5%
31%
8%
64 students
at home
at work
at university
while commuting


14. I want my work assessed (tick one ineach line)
50%
45%
40%
35%
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
45%
38%
5%
12%
37%
22%
11%
30%
9%
23%
37%
31%
by the computer
by a teacher
by a new person
don"t know
often
rarely
cotinuously
don't know
with marks only
description only
marks + description
don't know





At LU the results of observation and interviews, according to students' points of views, the most effective strategies are the following: 1) reasoning by analogy (54%), 2) subproblems strategy (30%), 3) generate-and-test (10%). These strategies have obvious logical sequence, and they are universal in application. The least popular strategies among students are the following: 4) mental imagery (5%) and 5) working backwards (1%).

Conclusion

Language and education can be analysed in their close interaction. During studies students develop themselves as personalities, socialize and enhance their responsibility. Language learning becomes part of personal competence for each individual. The aim of the studies is assimilation and structuring of knowledge as well as its practical use.

Pedagogical approaches in second language teaching and learning have shifted emphasis from learning content to the interaction of the learner with the content and with the environment. Much remains to be learned about the cognitive processes of learners when they use network-based environments. The absence of a united, clearly structured, theoretically grounded and practically developed approach to language acquisition and improvement (native, second or foreign) in higher schools is considered to be a disturbing factor in attaining a high quality level of academic language and efficiency of learning/teaching process.

The culture of co-operation is highly important to educate a student to be orientated into the future, open and democratic society of Latvia, as well as in the context of the integration process of trans-national society.

In the context of language education, computer networks make it possible for learners to take part in online foreign language studying and to extend their communicative experience to worlds far beyond the classroom. These possibilities have led to great expectations of how computer networks will enhance language learning. The study holds a number of students' points of views for the implementation of a network-based vocational English course. The obtained data of the NBVEC questionnaire has shown the various level of students' readiness for network-based vocational English.

The level of computer literacy had an impact on how a person is ready to participate in NBVEC: less motivated students represented the faculties not connected with electricity.

As we get used to new technologies in our daily lives, so we should get used to new technologies in the classroom and as we learn to accept the fact that domestic technology has advantages but also has limitations, so we gradually perceive the volume and the shortcomings of educational technology also, and we are then able with more confidence to integrate it into our syllabus and methodological planning.

Appendix A

Network-Based Vocational English Language Questionnaire

1. Computer access information

1. *I have a computer access at home: a/yes, b/no.*
2. *I have a computer access at university: a/yes, b/no.*
3. *I use: a/ PC, b/ MAC*
4. *4. I use an operating system: a/Windows b/ Linux c/ Unix d/ Mac e/OS*
5. *5. I have the Internet access: a/ Dial-up modem b/ISDN c/DSL d/Cable e/Satellite f/Other*
6. *I have certain time restrictions to my internet access: a/yes, b/no.*
7. *I have certain download limitations to my internet access: a/yes, b/no.*
8. *I own a palmtop/PDA: a/yes, b/no.*
   8.2 If yes, which model? a/Palm OS? b/ Win OS c/Symbian d/ Other
   8.3 Web- enabled? a/yes, b/no.
9. *I own a mobile phone: a/yes, b/no.*

9.2 It has GPRS capabilities. a/yes, b/no.
9.3 It is an UMTS (3G) phone. a/yes, b/no.

2. Vocational English needs.

1. *In vocational (professional) English I am a/beginner b/intermediate c/advanced*
2. *I need vocational English: a/often b/sometimes c/seldom d/never*
3. *I need vocational English in order to: a/communicate with native /non-native speakers b/take exams c/get promoted d/get a job e/change my job f/go abroad g/ do research h/other*
4. *I need vocational English for: a/telephoning b/traditional correspondence c/e-mail/internet use d/reading reports/manuals e/writing texts f/face to face communication g/making presentations h/negotiating i/asking for information j/giving instructions k/explaining l/other*
5. *In the course I mostly want to a/read texts b/write texts c/do exercises d/do tests e/communicate with others f/work in groups g/work in pairs h/other*
6. *My course priorities are: a/pronunciation b/vocabulary c/grammar d/communication e/listening f/speaking g/reading h/writing i/vocational development j/other*
7. *When learning I like to a/know the syllabus b/use a dictionary c/refer to a grammar book d/ listen to English being spoken e/watch English video f/record myself speaking g/get learning tips h/learn by heart i/translate j/other*
8. *My favorite exercises are a/gap filling b/multiple choice c/translation d/text summarizing d/matching e/crossword solving f/structure transformation g/finding errors in text h/playing out dialogues i/essay writing j/other*

3. ICT/ODL needs

1. *I need to improve my skills in a/basic computer literacy b/text-editing c/databases d/spreadsheets e/e-mail software f/web browsing/searching g/chat programs h/web authoring tools i/other*
2. *I want my work assessed: a/by the computer b/by a teacher c/by a colleague*
    a. *a/often b/rarely c/continuously*
    b. *a/with marks only b/description only c/marks + description d/other*
3. *When I learn I like to: a/work alone most of time b/communicate with a teacher c/communicate with another course participant d/communicate with a group of course participants e/other*
4. *When on-line learning English, I like to use a/standard language exercises b/e-mail c/chat d/blog d/bulletin boards(/discussion lists) e/videoconferencing f/other*
5. *For the internet course |I would be most comfortable using: a/a desktop workstation off-line b/ a desktop workstation on-line (internet-enabled)*

c/laptop with wireless access to the Internet d/palmtop off-line e/ palmtop on-line f/mobile phone g/other

6. *I would do the course mostly: a/at home b/at work c/at university d/other*
7. *For an Internet access I would be most comfortable using: a/electronic materials b/printed materials c/a mixture of both electronic and printed materials*
8. *Face to face interaction with my instructors and fellow students is a/very important b/somewhat important c/not important d/other*
9. *My need to take a distant delivered course is a/high b/medium c/low d/other*

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