

Utilizing Microsoft Sway to Make Interactive Presentations for Language Students in a Public Asian-Pacific University

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ABSTRACT

This research focused on teachers' and students' feedback on the application of Microsoft Sway in creating interactive presentations in an English-speaking Country Study course at a public university in Vietnam. Forty-five third-year English-major students were divided into five groups and required to create online presentations on different aspects of life in English-speaking countries, using specific templates in Microsoft Sway and incorporating various online and offline multimedia sources. The study was conducted through focus-group discussions with students and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Results showed positive feedback from students on improving their academic performance and language skills, citing benefits such as saving time with the tool's effortless design and easy access to a variety of useful reference sources. Teachers' interviews revealed improvement in students' reading, writing, and critical thinking skills during the process of creating content for the interactive presentations. However, students encountered difficulties searching, filtering relevant information on the web, and creating outlines for presentations. The study has practical implications for teachers and researchers looking to apply new online learning and teaching tools in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: language education, Microsoft Sway, interactive presentation, media-based tool

Introduction

The development of Information and Communications technology (ICT) has changed most aspects of life, and its application in higher education was inevitable. In some Western countries such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, national and state policies reflect the belief that "learners using ICT will reap benefits to their learning, and that learners need ICT skills to be employed in the future high-tech workplace" (Jordan, 2011, p.16).

In Vietnam, English and ICT are highly valued as two of the most important instruments in industrialization and modernization. ICT is seen as the means to support innovative teaching and learning in Vietnam and is often seen "as a way to merge into a globalizing world" (Peeraer, & Van Petegem, 2011, p.238). However, teachers and students have faced numerous difficulties

in finding appropriate tools to support their language teaching and learning. In particular, the design of digital learning materials such as videos, presentations, newsletters, infographics, and so on is the barrier that hinders students' study. Microsoft Sway, part of Microsoft Office, designed for creating presentations and documentation, has been used as a supporting tool for language education. Nevertheless, despite the multiple uses of Sway in education, research regarding its usage in language learning and its benefits and drawbacks is limited. This paper aims to study the benefits and drawbacks of applying Sway in making interactive presentations in an English-speaking course for third-year English-majored students at a public university in Vietnam.

This paper contributes significantly to the gap in the literature on implementing Sway in language classrooms in Vietnam by examining students' feedback on making presentations using Sway. Findings from this paper are beneficial not only for teachers but also for researchers in similar educational contexts.

Literature review

The introduction of ICT has brought about tremendous changes in different aspects of life, especially education. Thanks to ICT, new ways of teaching and learning have been formed to meet the demands of globalization.

UNESCO (2009) has defined ICT as

"a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit, store, create, share or exchange information. These technological tools and resources include computers, the Internet (websites, blogs and emails), live broadcasting technologies (radio, television and webcasting), recorded broadcasting technologies (podcasting, audio and video players, and storage devices) and telephony (fixed or mobile, satellite, visio/video-conferencing, etc.)."

In the field of language teaching and learning, ICT can be divided into two types, namely non-web-based and web-based learning tools. Whereas the former includes tools such as radio, television, films, and language lab, the latter covers online technologies such as YouTube, email, blogs, Skype, mobile phones, and iPods (Alkamel & Chouthaiwale, 2018). Nowadays, web-based learning is one of the fastest-growing fields, also known as technology-based learning, online education, or e-learning. It offers chances to develop e-learning environments that are well-designed, affordable, learner-centered, interactive, and flexible. This leads to the fact that lecturers need to be more technologically professional in this modern day (Ly et al., 2021; Andrew, 2022). By incorporating the use of ICT in learning activities, lecturers in the twenty-first century are no longer just ones who transmit knowledge but are also creating democratic and challenging learning conditions for students. Digital-based media and learning resources can be a solution to produce superior learning outcomes and engagement for students than conventional instructions (Wihartanti & Wibawa, 2017; Esparrago-Kalidas et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2022). Thus, lecturers can employ learning media based on technology as alternatives to traditional teaching methods.

Currently, there are a number of web-based media which can be effectively implemented in language education. One of them is e-learning Microsoft Sway. It is one of the platforms developed by Microsoft that can be used in making instructional media designs. Sway can be used to create engaging content and presentations without the requirement for a presenter (Hutchinson, 2020). As opposed to creating the typical Word document with photographs, it

allows students to display and demonstrate their digital literacy skills. Moreover, Sway can create newsletters and "how-to" guides that benefit lecturers and students. Additionally, it produces online presentations that could encourage students to quit more conventional formats such as Microsoft PowerPoint (Usman & Baihaqi, 2020). According to Huda (2017), Sway may be used to create products that blend texts, voices, videos, and images when the presentation is displayed. In light of this context, Sway is a tool that can be utilized in the creation of learning materials and as an alternative to online learning.

In comparison to other presentation apps, Sway App has the following advantages:

(a) Its excellent feature design makes it simple for users to upload a variety of content, including YouTube videos, photos, tweets, and other multimedia content (Istiqomah, 2016). This free app aids in gathering, organizing, and sharing our thoughts, accounts, and presentations on a more interesting web-based interactive screen. Sway is ideal for lecturers and students who will generate reports, resumes, and presentations or make course materials more enjoyable (Sudarmoyo, 2018).

(b) Users can input a variety of media in the form of photos from websites of free image suppliers such as Flickr, Bing, and Pickit. Also, users can include useful educational videos downloaded from YouTube, their own computer devices, or Cloud App (Wihartanti & Wibawa, 2017).

(c) Sway-based online learning resources can be accessible to students through cell phones, tablets, or computers. As a result, learning is not constrained by time or space. Lecturers who want to create their own online learning materials quickly and easily may find a solution in the simplicity of developing Sway-based materials (Wihartanti & Wibawa, 2017). Noticeably, Sway App will automatically reformat a presentation slide when the presenter views it on a smartphone, laptop, or computer (Istiqomah, 2016).

(d) Sway App makes it easier for students to collaborate with one another to create Sway projects (Istiqomah, 2016). Every group member can contribute to the presentation's content by editing Sway slides as long as they are allowed to access them. This is an outstanding feature that helps students work with their groups better. It is also very convenient for group members when they can access Sway projects at any time, anywhere, and with any device.

(e) Presentations created with Sway can be shared or embedded on websites and are automatically backed up to the cloud. Therefore, worrying about losing data is unnecessary (Sudarmoyo, 2018).

Research Questions

The study sought answers to the following research questions in order to achieve its objectives:

1. What are the benefits of using Sway as an online learning tool in terms of academic performance, language skills & IT skills?
2. What difficulties do the students and teachers encounter during the application of Sway as an online learning tool?
3. What do teachers and students suggest to maximize the efficiency of using Sway as an online learning tool?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

As mentioned previously, this study focused on investigating the teachers' and students' feedback on the application of Microsoft Sway in making interactive presentations in a content course at a public university in Vietnam. Microsoft Sway has been applied as a digital-based media for students to make interactive presentations in a course where students are required to work in groups to search for information about one of the selected aspects of country life they study, such as geography and political life, and culture. After that, they designed an online presentation summarizing the information they collected using Microsoft Sway. Then, the final product link will be shared with the lecturer and the other classmates to read and do the follow-up exercises. This is considered an assignment of the course that students must complete online outside the class.

Therefore, data were collected from all teachers of English and third-year English-major students who were in the researchers' faculty and had been involved in utilizing the Microsoft Sway in the course of English-speaking Country Studies during the academic school year of 2021-2022. There were seven classes in the course, ranging from 22 to 30 students per class. For purposive sampling, the researchers invited all five teachers who had taught seven classes of the course and students who had taken the course and were willing to be involved in this study. The researchers sent emails to all teachers to invite them to participate in the study and make individual arrangements accordingly. For student participants, the researchers went to each class and met them directly after their class hours to explain the purpose of this study, then invited six to eight students from each class to join the focus group discussions. Totally all five personal interview participants and 45 focus-group discussion participants (divided into 7 groups) participated in this research. All the seven focus-group discussions with students and five individual interviews with teachers were carried out in July, 2022, one month after the course completion.

Design of the Study

The study employed a qualitative method through focus-group discussions with students and semi-structured interviews with teachers.

Focus-group discussions: The discussions were based on 14 detailed questions which can be classified into four different sections. The first four questions in section one aim to explore whether students have ever used Sway before, how they used this online tool in the course of English-speaking country studies, and whether they like its application or not. The next three questions in section two focus on how students evaluate the impact of applying Microsoft Sway on their learning in terms of academic performance, language skills, and IT skills. Section three, including four questions, mainly clarifies the difficulties the students may face during the application of Sway. Then the three last questions in section four are expected to elicit students' suggestions for maximizing the efficiency of using Sway as an online learning tool in this course as well as other courses in the next semesters.

Semi-structured interviews: The personal semi-structured interviews with all five subject teachers were guided by 15 specific questions, which can be divided into four main sections, and they are generally similar to four sections of the student focus-group discussions. The first section, including five questions, aims at acquiring some information about teachers' experience in teaching the subject, the number of students in each class, the mode of subject teaching,

either online or offline, how the online tool was used, and whether the teachers like its application in the course or not. The second section, with three next questions, centers around the impacts of the Sway application in terms of students' academic performance, language skills, and information technology skills. The third section consisting of four questions, focuses on exploring the challenges that both students and teachers faced during the application of the tool. The last section comprising three last questions uncovers the individual teachers' suggestions for better the application of Sway as an online learning & teaching tool in the upcoming years.

Data collection procedures

The data collection started with student focus group discussions. Seven focus group discussions among 45 students were conducted as part of this study, including four groups of six and three groups of seven. They were all third-year English-majored students and took part in the course of English-speaking country studies at a public university in Hanoi, Vietnam. They all participated in the course for the first time and were willing to join the discussion of this study. All the focus group discussions lasted 45-60 minutes and were conducted in students' classrooms after their studying hours. For better understanding and sharing, all the discussions were carried out in Vietnamese, the mother tongue of both the researchers and participants. One researcher participated in and facilitated the discussion among integrated students as a moderator in each focus group discussion. Thanks to the permission from the participants, all discussions were recorded in a digital audio recorder and responses and comments of the participants were also written down by the researchers while unfolding the focus group discussions.

The focus group discussion data collection process was then followed by personal semi-structured interviews with all five subject teachers. They were all English lecturers and were involved in teaching the course from one to three years. Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, in which four interviews were conducted at the participants' offices during office hours. Only one interview was conducted online in the evening via Zoom because this participant, who had one year of teaching experience, just moved to a new institution at the time of the interview. All five semi-structured interviews were also conducted in Vietnamese, the first language of both the researchers and participants. With permission from the informants, all the interviews were recorded, in which four offline interviews were recorded in a digital audio recorder, and one online interview was recorded via Zoom.

Data collection analysis

The data analysis procedure began with the transcription of all the recorded semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions which were transcribed into Vietnamese. Each transcript was then marked with a filename. The seven focus groups of discussions were coded from FG1 to FG7, and the five personal interviews were coded from PI1 to PI5 to ensure the confidentiality of the research. Later on, the data collected were coded and thematically analyzed. Key points and issues emerged from the data sorting and analyzing process. All the benefits, challenges as well as suggestions for better application of Microsoft Sway in the course were highlighted. The researchers identified all the common themes and sub-themes in the interview and focus group data, then important quotes from transcripts of the interviews and discussions were selected and carefully translated into English to demonstrate the findings and discussion.

Findings and discussion

The data from focus-group discussions and personal semi-structured interviews were analyzed in three different themes, including the experience of participants in applying the online tool, Microsoft Sway, into the course; the benefits it brings about as media-based learning and teaching; and the difficulties that both students and teachers encountered during the application of the e-learning tool.

Teachers and students' experience in applying Microsoft Sway as an online tool

The first section of both focus group discussions and personal interviews aims to explore teachers' and students' experiences in learning and teaching the subject using the media-based tool Microsoft Sway. Students confirmed that they had never heard about this application before, so this was their first first-time experience using Microsoft Sway in the course. It is surprising that none of the students has ever used Sway as a learning tool in any subject before.

"We have to make presentations quite frequently in our subjects, and we often use PowerPoints to illustrate for our group and individual presentations. We have also recently used Canva, another online tool, to make our presentations. However, we have never used Sway before. This is our first-time experience in using Sway to design an online presentation." (FG7)

The interviewed teachers also shared the same idea and admitted that they had never used this online tool before teaching this subject. Therefore, this is a brand-new experience for students and teachers to explore the Sway and its application in the course. One interviewed participant is mentioned as below:

"Although I heard about the application of Sway in teaching English in some English classes elsewhere, I have never used this tool beforehand. It was not until I taught this subject that I had to explore how to use Sway and apply it to my teaching." (PI5)

Teachers and students generally shared quite similar understandings of the task using the tool in this course regarding how they used this online tool in the course of English-speaking country studies. It should be noted that English-speaking country studies have been included in the curriculum for just three years at this university. Moreover, this subject is a blended-learning course in which students have two face-to-face class periods and one online learning period each week. Students were required to apply the specific templates of Microsoft Sway to create online presentations on allocated different aspects of life in English-speaking countries, namely the culture and political life of Singapore, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. A group of two to three students was assigned a specific topic weekly, and they were asked to use Microsoft Sway to present what they had searched for and synthesized documents related to the given topic. When the interactive online report using Sway was completed, the group of student presenters needed to send their product to other class members for studying. Later on, class members needed to check their understanding of the online presentation on Sway by doing an online test designed by the presenters on a specific testing website called ontest.vn. This web-based test can show the detailed result of individual responses, including the score, time duration, time access, and so on. In addition, teachers also revealed that they helped students to check the interactive presentations on Sway before being sent to the whole class for studying:

"In my classes, students are asked to send their online presentations using Sway and the self-designed web-based tests to the teacher for checking and revising if necessary. Then, all links to the Sway presentations and online tests are sent to the whole class for students' self-studying and doing. In fact, students' presentations on Sway are not so

long, they generally aim at presenting what students have searched for on the webs, based on the allocated topics. Personally, I think my students mainly focus on summarizing and presenting the information on given topics, instead of comparing and contrasting what they have searched for about the assigned topics with what they have learnt in class. I rarely see any online Sway-based presentations which give a deep and clear analysis in terms of the content, mostly focusing on presenting and synthesizing the information that students have searched for." (PI2)

Although most student participants and interviewed teachers had a basic understanding of the online presentation requirements in common, the aforementioned teacher's idea was different from what students shared because most students mentioned no requirement of analyzing or contrasting the found information with what they had learned in class. More importantly, when asked for more details about this requirement, Teacher PI2 admitted that there was no specific requirement for students to do so. However, she expected that students should not only present the found information but also compare and contrast the searched information to better their online presentations. Among focus-group discussions, only one group of informants mentioned the idea of making a comparison in terms of the presentation content:

"We are required to make online presentations based on Sway to summarize and present what we have explored and found about a topic assigned by our teacher. All of the topics are about English-speaking countries such as Canada, Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, except for Britain and America because we study about these two countries in class. Sway presentations are for online study only. We often type in some keywords to search for what we need. Although there's no specific website to look for, we often do our searching in some famous websites like Wikipedia, BBC News, etc. to keep updated with the latest information. . . . As far as we know, it's not very clear how updated the found information should be, but we still try our best to find out what can be the latest in the given topics. My teacher highly appreciates such information, and we think that we can also get better marks. Some groups can even compare the searched information of the assigned topics with that of Vietnam, but it's optional. The teacher makes no compulsory requirement about this, so including the comparison or not depends on each group." (FC6)

These aforementioned pieces of sharing showed the mismatch between the students and the teachers' understanding of the assignment task when applying Sway. Though this was not a barrier for students to complete their online presentation on Sway, both sides could remove or avoid it before it was put into practice.

Benefits of applying Microsoft Sway as a media-based learning & teaching tool

The second part of the interview and focus group discussion focuses on the advantages that Microsoft Sway brings to teaching and learning English – speaking Country Studies based on 3 aspects: academic performance, language skills, and IT skills. Overall, both teachers and students reported positive feedback about the effectiveness of Microsoft Sway. Students believed that applying Microsoft Sway in the subject helped them learn more about a new, simple, and easy-to-use online presentation tool. In addition, in the process of designing Sway slides, they learned how to synthesize the information they had found and selected the appropriate information to put on the slides. Also, this process helped students access a variety of useful reference sources.

"What impressed me most about Sway is its simplicity and convenience in designing slides. I only need to input the content and select some photos to illustrate. Then,

Microsoft Sway will automatically design beautiful slides for my presentation. It only takes me about 15 minutes to complete the slides." (FG3)

In terms of their academic performance, students said they got better scores with Sway presentations than delivering oral presentations in class. It was also faster and easier to grasp a large amount of information about the lesson by reading other groups' Sway slides.

"I think that designing Sway slides is easier to get high marks than delivering oral presentations in class. This is especially beneficial for shy or introverted students because they do not need to present in front of the teacher and a lot of other classmates." (FG7)

"As long as you know how to select ideas for your presentation and how to design beautiful Sway slides, your presentation score will definitely be higher. Those who don't know how to design Sway slides effectively can do better after listening to the teacher's comments on other groups' products. Besides, they will learn from experience by sending the teacher a draft for correction and then submit the final version later." (FG2)

Teachers also agreed with the idea that Microsoft Sway could improve students' academic performance.

"During the process of designing Sway slides, students have to apply both synthetic and analytical skills. Thus, their critical thinking can be improved considerably, and it is obvious that their academic performance will also improve." (PI3)

The above finding is consistent with the previous research of Wihartanti & Wibawa (2017), which shows that using technology, particularly web-based learning, can enhance students' academic performance and improve learning outcomes.

Regarding language skills, both teachers and students supposed that reading and writing skills could be improved considerably during the process of creating content for interactive presentations.

"When students search for information for their presentation, they have to read quite a lot of reference materials, and then they have to select which information can be used and how it is organized and expressed to make readers understand. Therefore, their reading and writing skills can be accelerated." (PI4)

Students also noted that they could broaden their vocabulary and knowledge of the subject matter while doing their Sway assignments.

"When we read the reference materials, we could learn many new words and expressions about the topic. Moreover, we had to select the information to present on Sway slides and chose concise words to express our ideas. The main purpose was to make the readers understand what we conveyed without presenters explaining in spoken words." (FG4)

All the participants in the focus group discussions and personal interviews confirmed that Microsoft Sway could be a wonderful web-based tool for teaching and learning online because of its convenience and simplicity. This media app fully supports teachers and students in designing and storing slides online.

"Designing Sway slides saves much more time than designing PowerPoint slides. Everything seems to be available on Sway. I can input the pictures and videos directly on the Sway app just by entering some keywords in the search box. I do not have to google images or videos, then download them and make a copy to PowerPoint slides as

usual. This is an online tool, so my teammates and I could work together easily at home. I am not good at technology, so Sway helps me a lot in designing slides for presentations." (FG1)

Due to the convenience of designing presentation slides, Microsoft Sway is a wonderful tool for those who are not good at technology.

"Sway has more utilities and is more convenient than PowerPoint for e-learning. So, it is a user-friendly web-based tool for delivering presentations online. Even those who are not good at technology can design Sway slides easily. Therefore, I think this is also why students' IT skills are not improved much when using Sway. But knowing how to use Microsoft Sway is very helpful for students' future jobs. The more supporting tools you know, the better your job is, right?" (PI5).

Difficulties encountered during the application of the e-learning tool

Regarding the obstacles hindering the application of the web-based tool, Microsoft Sway, the answers from student informants were not really varied but similar. Most students thought that they had little or almost no technological difficulty in exploring and using Sway though it was their first use.

"Since Sway is a new tool to me, I think it's a little bit difficult for me, but I don't really count on me. Actually, I spent about 15 minutes getting familiar with the web interface, reading the usage instructions of the tool, then I could design basic online pages on Sway. Later on, I practice designing more slides on Sway, which helps me become more skillful in this application." (FC3)

More interestingly, the focus group discussion also revealed the trouble in dealing with the content on the allocated topics rather than the tool itself.

"For me, the most challenging barrier that hinders me in making presentations using Sway lies in the content of the presentation. It doesn't really bother me with technology. I find it quite difficult to search for information related to the given topic; then, it's difficult to select and put all the found information in a logical outline before I really make the online Sway presentation. So, the content related to the topic bothers me a lot, not really the matter of using the tool." (FC5)

In addition, they mentioned that instead of consulting their teachers, they often asked some other members of their class for help if necessary. For example, they asked their friends for tips on how to make the outline faster and how to make the Sway to be unique and outstanding. Also, they admitted that only a few students who were the first groups of presenters needed teachers' support and guidance. They explained that it could be learned a lot from the teachers' feedback and comments on the very first online presentations on Sway. Later on, other groups of presenters could get assistance from the previous presenters, which meant that students continued to apply Sway as an e-learning tool to make their presentations how they thought it should be. This may be one of the reasons leading to the misunderstanding of the requirement or may affect the quality of the interactive presentations on Sway.

Implications

Based on the results from focus group discussions and personal interviews, utilizing Microsoft Sway as a digital tool for teaching and learning English - speaking Country Studies is feasible. In fact, Sway is a very user-friendly tool for both teaching and learning. It is perfect for

assignments that require presenting and synthesizing information or testing writing skills. Sway-based designs produce beautiful, eye-catching, and vivid interactive presentations. Therefore, it is recommended that Sway slides should be used in some other subject assignments that require students' searching and synthesizing skills. Furthermore, teachers can employ digital Sway-based teaching materials in some courses to support students' online learning at home.

The challenges in teaching and learning English - speaking Country Studies do not come from the tool itself but from the course content and how to control students' group work. The following are some implications that the researchers may offer to teachers and students.

For the teachers

Firstly, the teachers should introduce and give clear and specific instructions on how to use Microsoft Sway right from the course's orientation lesson. It is possible that teachers can show some sample designs of Sway slides to help students know what good Sway slides look like.

Secondly, it is advisable for the subject teachers to give specific requirements to evaluate students' final products. This means the teachers should clarify how students should synthesize and analyze the searched information and whether students need to compare and contrast their found information with what they have learned in class. It is ideal for teachers to design an evaluation checklist with detailed criteria and a concrete benchmark for students' products. As a result, the mismatch between the students and the teachers' task requirements could be avoided in advance, and the student's performance could be enhanced.

Thirdly, staff meetings among the subject teachers play an important role in this situation. Teachers are recommended to have discussions with each other at the beginning of the course to ensure that all the requirements, criteria for evaluation, and templates for designing and making presentations on Sway are discussed and shared. They may also make some demonstrative online presentations on Sway themselves, so they can handle students' questions about its application later on. These staff meetings are beneficial not only for the implementation of this assignment task but also for the teachers' professional development; therefore, they should be held regularly.

For the students

Students should study all the assignment guidelines given by the teachers carefully to ensure they are clear about what to do before carrying out the task. This can help them to remove any misunderstanding in the task requirement as well as be able to go on the right track from the beginning.

Students can have peer support during the assignment presentation; however, it's also indispensable for students to consult with their subject teacher throughout the process of selecting the information, making outlines, and designing the presentations on Sway. Teachers are available to give students consultation and support in terms of both technical matters and subject knowledge.

Notably, it is recommended that students are offered more chances to take part in various clubs such as the information technology club in which they can learn how to self-design a video, their own website or online postcards, etc., so they can be better at a variety of designing skills in particular and IT skills in general.

The majority of students were in favour of applying Sway in another course thanks to its benefits and convenience in making an interactive presentation, which is also similar to the teachers' ideas in continuing to use Sway as an online tool in teaching and learning languages.

This leads to the fact that students need to be exposed to a wide variety of media-based tools to better their self-learning and group studying.

Conclusion

This qualitative research attempted to explore the teachers' and students' feedback in applying Microsoft Sway as an e-learning tool for making interactive presentations in a language course. Based on the focus group discussions with students and personal semi-structured interviews with subject teachers, the findings revealed positive feedback from students in the application of Sway in the course in terms of academic performance tasks and language skills as well. Meanwhile, little barriers could be found in terms of technological problems. The content matter bothered students much more, including selecting the most relevant information, arranging it into a logical outline, and so on. Finally, the implications on the criteria for evaluating students' presentations, giving consultation to students, and offering more opportunities for students to access a wide range of media-based tools will be expected to better the application of Sway into language study. Hopefully, the study also carries practical implications for teachers and researchers who want to apply a new learning and teaching e-learning application tool in similar educational contexts.

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