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Integrating Technology to Engage and Enhance Language Learning Skills in an Online Environment

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Abstract

In an online environment, experts feel that the learner and the instructors have new roles to adapt to. There are many challenges in an online environment especially for the facilitator in making the learners to be more self-directed and collaborative. Therefore this article is on how technology can be used to enhance not only teaching but also to test the important skills, LSRW online. To instruct teachers and students on the use of technology for a more successful online blended learning. To show how learners can become more involved as knowledge generators and co - facilitators, to enter into a mutual communicative environment. It also focuses on ways to keep the online learner engaged by making use of online tools that are interactive and artificially intelligent.

Key words: language skills, technology, facilitator, engaging, online blended learning, online tools, method.

Introduction:

In contemporary English language teaching methods, the application of modern technology has gained a significant advance. Electronic teaching programmes are becoming predominant owing to positive student involvement. Teachers have become familiar with a range of technological aids that are designed to facilitate teaching. Using technology in learning is not a new area, but how effectively technology can be used to enhance the teaching and evaluating the language skills in an online environment is the need of the hour. There are many challenges both teachers and learners will face in an online environment. Especially for the instructor, he has to device engaging activities on how to energize the online environment and empower students, so they could be held responsible for their own learning. The learners could easily escape the attention of the instructor and his own peers due to the lack of verbal and physical communication cues. Engaging the learners has been a difficult question to answer. The only way to solve this according to Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson is to engage the learners in a collaborative learning process. This means the instructor and the learner are partners in building the knowledge base.

Review of Literature:

During the course of this study, relevant literature has been reviewed. The article concludes by offering a number of recommendations which may further contribute to the improvement of teaching methods by advancing the widespread application of modern technology. The use of online interactive tools has been in practice for the past fifteen years and there have been books on the guidelines and strategies on how to make use of online communication tools. Some of the books that relate to online teaching and learning are Turoff's *Book Learning Networks (*1996*),* Pallof and Pratt's *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace* (1999) and Salmon's *E-tivities* (2002).

Jonita Stepp-Greany in her article titled "Student Perceptions on Language Learning in a Technological Environment: Implications for the New Millennium" surveyed a range of technological approaches and methods in order to determine the importance of the role of teachers, the relevance and availability of technology labs and individual components, and the effect of using technology on the learning process of a foreign language. It was established that the student perceptions of the teacher as the primary learning facilitator, and insisted on the role of regular language lab teaching. The research further studied the effects of relevant technology on the learning process of foreign language acquisition. It came up with the following results: Increased motivation, improvement in self-concept and mastery of basic skills, more student-centred learning and engagement in the learning process, and more active processing, resulting in higher-order thinking skills and better recall (165).

Therefore this article will explore the various ways to teach and test these skills through online tools that will make learning and testing more effective. It will instruct teachers and students on the use of technology for a more successful online blended learning and show how learners can become more involved as knowledge generators and co- facilitators, to enter into a mutual communicative environment.

This article will also focus on ways to keep the online learner engaged by making use of online tools that are interactive and artificially intelligent. Few online tools and platforms have been identified to teach the fours skills, LSRW and show how listening, speaking and reading skills could be tested. It is socially relevant as students and instructors are looking for newer online tools to teach and students are looking for better platforms to make their learning fruitful.

Since LSRW skills are essential to test the process of language acquisition, making use of online tools will make the testing process easy. It will be more efficient and save time and space for both the learner and the instructor. This research would be practically relevant in the field of language teaching.

During the course of the pandemic the use of modern technology in teaching and learning gained a significant momentum. Innovative application of methods, tools, materials, devices, systems, and strategies have been directly relevant to English language teaching, learning, evaluating and has led to more accessibility, time friendly and more accurate, thus making the evaluating procedure more intuitive and participative. Technology is an important educational tool helpful across a range of teaching and learning contexts. Technology is very essential in English language teaching because it offers a number of potential opportunities to enhance both the content and delivery of the pedagogies typically associated with traditional English language instruction. Integrating Technology in teaching, learning and evaluating a language enables the student and teachers understand and assimilate the instructions easily. If the instructor is familiar with the concept of using modern technology and the use of modern appliances, devices innovatively it will facilitate faster and more comprehensive learning progression.

Many pedagogical theories prove that the use of technology improves the learning and language knowledge. The use of technology in teaching English benefits students and teachers to achieve the required results. The use of modern technology in English language teaching has become unavoidable, due to the growth and development of artificial intelligence in software development. Therefore it is necessary to improve the standards of teaching the language skills more effectively inculcating the past and the present pedagogies of teaching the language skills.

Educators should be ready to adapt themselves to keep apace of the global technological revolution. This is possible only by adopting the modern technological means such as computerization, multi-media devices, mobile phones, audio/visual effects applications, and social media, to optimize English language instruction and equip teachers to connect with classroom language learners in a systematic and advanced way. Technology has revolutionized education and teaching and learning has seen a tremendous change, since it is easy, immediate, has unlimited access to software, applications and materials which can accelerate English

teaching and learning. Though technology has an important role to play, the role of a teacher cannot be denied because they often play a key role in operating the different tools and teaching methods. Most programmes are user specific and are designed to promote effective English teaching to increase learner understanding and attain the English language skills (qtd.in. Mofareh A, 169).

In the book titled *E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning*, Gilly Salmon presents a five stage model for a better structured online learning. It demonstrates the model of teaching and learning online, researched and developed from the experience of participants in computer mediated conferencing at different levels of education and contexts. The model shows how to motivate online participants, to build learning through appropriate e-tivities and to pace e-learners through programmes of training and development.
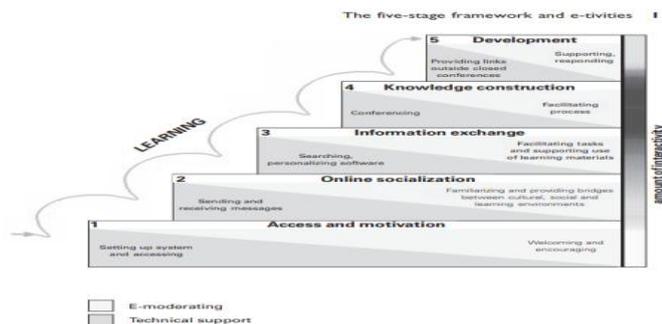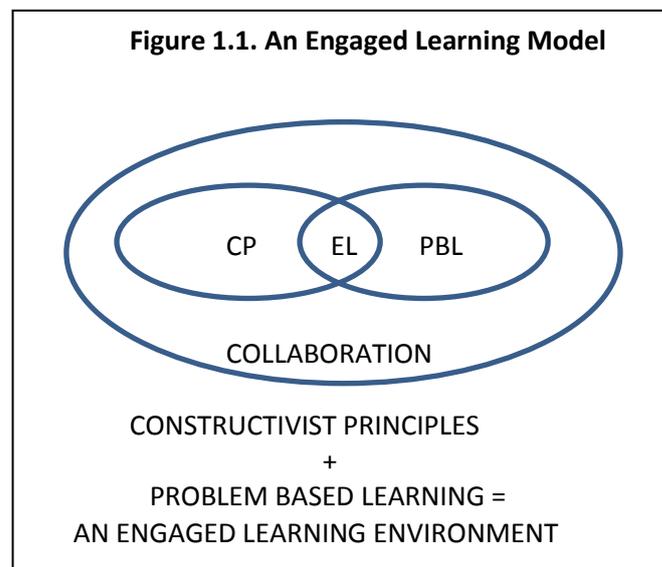

Figure 2.1   Model of teaching and learning online through online networking

Salmon, 11

It has been proved that the use of technology in foreign language learning influences the development of linguistic skills. The following skills have been reported to have improvement in student writing skills through the use of networked computers. Also, in the networked writing project it could be seen that more fluidity of conversation, more use of complex sentences, and more self-disclosure are possible. It eliminates strong teacher dominance and freeds students to express themselves, resulting in a larger quantity and better quality of communication. Reading can also be improved as well.

In Beauvois' 1994 study, 43% of the students reported that reading skills had improved. Lunde (1990) also reported that students of Japanese enrolled in a computer mediated communication project showed improvement in reading comprehension. Furthermore, in follow-up interviews in the Beauvois study (1994), many students expressed an increased confidence in speaking. The researcher speculates that the increased language use promoted by the LAN environment promoted this self-confidence. She implies that the conversational aspect of writing via the network helped students to routinize a certain number of expressions, promoting the development of automatic structures that aid speaking. She concludes more boldly in the later study (1998) that LAN writing supports oral language development. Sanaoui and Lapkin (1992) also found that "considerable Jonita Stepp-Greany Student Perceptions on Language Learning… Language Learning & Technology 167 growth occurred in French-speaking skills and possibly listening and reading comprehension as well, which implies that an explicit focus on one area can have an effect on the other skills" as well (p. 544). (Stepp-Greany , 167)

The model given below can be useful to engage learners online:

Figure 1.1. An Engaged Learning Model

CP   EL   PBL

COLLABORATION

CONSTRUCTIVIST PRINCIPLES
+
PROBLEM BASED LEARNING =
AN ENGAGED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

(Conrad, 6)

Technology can be integrated into the classroom through two approaches according to Warschauer. One is a cognitive approach that allows learners to meaningfully increase their exposure to language. This gives them their self-comprehension skills; the second approach is the social approach. In this approach the learners will have opportunities for authentic social interactions that helps gain the real-life skills through engagement in real activities (qtd.in. Mofareh A, 170). Further he says that "A computer is ideal for carrying out repeated drills, since the machine does not get bored with presenting the same material and since it can provide immediate non-judgmental feedback. A computer can present such material on an individualized basis, allowing students to proceed at their own pace and freeing up class time for other activities." (Warschauer).

Another survey was carried out by Bordbar (2010) to find out the reasons and factors behind language teachers' use of computer technology in the classroom. It further investigated the facilitators' attitudes towards the use of computer and information. The findings stated that that almost all of them had positive attitudes towards the use of computers in the class. Shyamlee (2012, p. 155) analyzed the use of multi-media technology in language teaching and found that technology enhances learning. Shyamlee recommended the use of multi-media technology in classrooms because of its positive impact on the learning process. (Mofareh, 170)

The research establishes the failure of traditional English teaching methods, and confirms that learners are more enthusiastic and interactive when using modern technology to assimilate English. Statistical data reiterates that a high percentage of those learning English language skills do so through modern media such as smart boards, computers and screens, as compared to the traditional teaching methods. Moreover, the study reveals that the interaction with teachers and overall responsiveness of students in the classroom is significantly improved when using modern techniques in English teaching. It is clear that students learn enthusiastically through technology.

Techniques to assess LSRW skills through online:

Dave Guymon lists out five steps where technology can be integrated effectively:

First Identify the relative advantage, Determine the objectives and assessments, Design instructional strategies, prepare the instructional environment, analyze results and make revisions. While assessing the learners, the teacher should know what is to be tested. The following points can be considered while assessing:

- Are the students able to understand basic communication, information, within a familiar area?

- Are they able to cope with an academic course, read the media for information and correspond appropriately?

- Are they able to understand standard spoken language, live broadcasts, on familiar and unfamiliar topics?

The assessment can be focussed on:

a) Learning vocabulary.

b) Developing strategies for reading quickly.

c) Understanding grammatical structures

d) Developing strategies for anticipating content.

e) Understanding referencing.

f) Developing strategies for dealing with unknown words.

Alma Lama in her article, *The Use of Technology to Enhance Reading and Listening Skills for Students with SPLDS*, identifies a few online tools that may be useful for enhancing the online teaching and learning experience. The following online platforms could be used to engage and interact with students, making online teaching and learning more productive:

ED Puzzle

It enables self-paced learning with interactive lessons and it is compatible with most devices. The instructor could know if the learner has seen and learnt and keep a track of their learning.

Kahoot!

It is an interactive game-based learning platform used to engage students by creating quizzes and learning materials.

Story Birds

It is a visual storytelling platform used for reading and writing.

Puppet Pals

It is a very creative app to engage students. Through this platform you can create your own show with animation and audio in real time.

Explain Everything

It is a platform that enables students become visual communicators. Here through interactive learning you can create collaborative learning experiences where you and our students can share your thoughts and ideas in real-time.

Google Classroom

Classroom helps students organize their work and post to their teachers and classmates.

Smart Notebook

It is a platform that offers implementation services, professional development and community resources to support student's needs.

Star fall

It is a platform that teaches students to read with phonics, and this platform has been a great source for over a decade.

Nearpod

Nearpod is a tool that encourages students to participate actively, it engages, and it has interactive features.

Moodle

Moodle is used for blended learning, distance education, flipped classroom and other online learning projects in schools, universities, and workplaces.

Conclusion

The use of technology in in the classroom can make the entire teaching learning process exciting and productive. Different platforms can help the learners enhance reading and listening skills at their own pace. A number of benefits for students related to the general use of technology in classrooms have been reported. Therefore it's the need of the hour that teachers of language adapt to the changing scenario of language teaching.

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