

E-magazines, the Art of English Learning

Shichao Zhang

Harbin Institute of Technology (China)
miaoyin99999@163.com

Abstract

In China, many universities students have lost their passion in learning English as a second language. For post-graduate students in Harbin Institute of Technology, the classroom learning time has been set to only 32 hours. The aim of this E-magazine project is to promote great interests to the students so that they are willing to learn themselves after class by reading the E-magazines. Each issue of the E-magazines has the same columns but with a different topic. It contains multi-media columns such as Filming Dubbing, Picture Reading, Story-telling and Tests, Famous Quotations, Famous Speech, Chicken Soup for the Soul and Beautiful Melody. Flash technology and computer animations are the two main art forms of ICT technologies used in the issues. Magazines are very user-friendly. They are all executive files (.exe files). Readers don't need any advanced computer skills. They only double-click it. It doesn't need the Internet connections either. The contents of the magazines are linked to classroom activities. The project won first prize at the 14th Chinese National CAI Project Competition in 2013.

1. Introduction of problems and a new multi-modal teaching system

Sponsored by Institution for Postgraduates in HIT, the system named E-magazines for Postgraduates were established in 2010. In fact, it is a small language database based on the theory of multi-modal learning and autonomic-learning. It is used in the teaching for postgraduate students.

1.1 Problems in teaching and learning in HIT

As it is already mentioned above in the abstract, the in-class time for the postgraduate students in HIT was only 32 hours for the whole term. And they only study for one term now. It is divided into 16 weeks. The first week is the course introduction and the last week is the oral exam. In week seven and eight, they are the drama performance and film dubbing activities in class. Apart from the above, only twenty-four hours left for the teaching.

Furthermore, there are many postgraduate students who can not speak fluent English in my university. Although they have been learning English for about 10 years, it is still a big problem for them to speak English freely. Most of the Chinese students were very shy and they just dared not to speak. Some of them even can not speak a single word. It is so-called dumb English. Their listening was so poor that they could not understand foreigner at all. Therefore, there are a large number of students who have already lost their interests in learning for some time. Some of them were even afraid of learning English. So the only thing they expected was to pass the exam.

How can a student improve his oral English, listening comprehension, reading and writing in such a short time? How can a teacher achieve that? Apparently it is a very difficult task to finish in the given period. This makes it a must to create a new teaching platform with the aid of computers. It is a kind of ICT based language teaching and learning approach.

In some other Asian countries, the systems of learning English have changed in the past ten years. For example, the Japanese government has been making the reform of English teaching in the past ten years. In old times, they emphasize on written exams and tests. Now they have moved to improve the learners with comprehensive communicative abilities so that their English levels have improved enormously.

In South Korea, some of the top universities brought GSIS (The Graduate School of International Studies) courses to their postgraduate students after their 7th course reformation. This is very famous now and English is the only language used in the teaching process. Professors who are invited to teach in their universities are coming from the famous universities (such as Harvard University, Yale University, Stanford University and Cambridge University etc.) and everyone of them has a Ph.D degree in their own teaching field. And it makes a difference.

They did change a lot in some other universities in China. In Qinghua University, they even canceled the in-class teaching and change it to a web-based learning system. The teachers went to the classrooms only for answering questioned they encountered in their learning. In most of the universities in China, reducing teaching-hours is widely applied.

All the above makes us think. We are far beyond the time with only books and tapes. We want to do the change now. We need the e-learning to help. We shall develop a new teaching and learning system which can make good use of the students' after-class time so that their autonomic study would be very effective.



1.2 What should be done--a new system

A new system should be created with the following features:

- 1) Stimulate the learner's interests in learning. At least the forms of the system should be very beautifully set up so that it was believed that it should be very welcomed by the students. It should be more interesting than only the textbooks. And interest is the best teacher.
- 2) Provide the students with materials in different forms and it is so called multi-modes input. It is not only the still texts. Apart from that, many different forms such as sounds, background music, songs with lyrics and video, fine articles, amusing illustrations, dynamic pictures, films, animations etc. should also be included. The multi-modes materials above should enliven the system. It was expected that these should greatly stimulate the students' learning interests.
- 3) The multi-modal materials is somehow linked to the corresponding textbook used in class. The textbook is theme-based. It has been designed to have 12 units. The corresponding book used in class is very colorful and the in-class activities make their time fully fulfilled. Activities are centralized on speaking. Verbal presentation, questionnaire, role-play, debate etc. make them happy and the forms change from personal task to pair work or discussion in a group. Most of them are group works. Everyone represents his own group. Students have to cooperate with each other over half of the class time so that it helps them to concentrate and focus. Joyful occasions make them change their attitude towards learning. These become very effective ways to improve their study.
- 4) According to the multi-modal materials, students have to do some extracurricular activities, for instance giving a public speech themselves or playing a drama. In the activities, normally they would prepare it for several days or even weeks. Under the help of the given materials, these activities weren't dreary at all. In drama performance, they write the play themselves and decide what and how to perform in the play after their careful strategy. For them this is a major operation which involves considerable planning. They are the scriptwriters, directors, actors and actresses and the producers. These encourage their artistic creativity. At the end of the activity, they start to love to learn the language.
- 5) The contents of the materials should not be very old. Some of them are even very new. The students should be equipped with knowledge. And all fear was merged in curiosity.
- 6) The multi-modal materials should cover many subjects.

Under these circumstances, a new system with the e-magazines based on multi-modal theory was brought up to the students to improve their English level in 16 weeks' time in the end. It is believed to be one of the best multi-modal solutions and e-learning solutions for language teaching and learning. It provides learner with high quality and innovation. It was believed to lead to effective learning.

2. A new multi-modal teaching system

2.1 Theoretical support- the main concepts

"A picture is worth a thousand words", so we are told by the time-tested wisdom. Humans are multimodal animals enjoying multimedia presentations(Gu, Y. G., 2007).

Multimodal discourse is any communicative activity that is created by more than one semiotic mode(Kress,G.& Van Leeuwen), and these semiotic modes can be language, images, music, colors and so on.

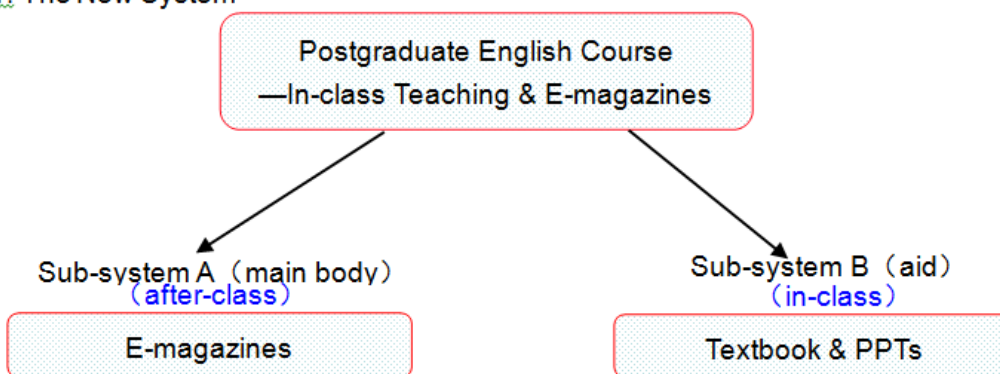
The very notion of multi-modal teaching is not foreign to teachers who teach English as foreign languages. And it is very popular nowadays in e-learning. It was firstly brought up by New London Group(New London Group,1996). It is any multi-modal discourse involved in the teaching process

And in the learning process, merging these multi-modes into a harmonious combination, the learners should use all different sensory organs as many as possible to experience multi-modal activities and join the interaction between the teaching and the learning. The use of multi-modes teaching makes the process of information obtaining more vivid and easier and it is also easier to remember. Research shows that multi-modal elements improve the learner's attitude towards study(Zhang, Z. 2010). Guichon & McLornan (2008) research into multi-modal effects on second language learning and brought up the approaches to the course design of computer-aided learning. Royce(2002) and Stein(2000) explore the rules for multi-modal design in second language learning. The more the teacher masters and uses multimodal teaching, the greater improvements the students make (Zhong, Z.X. 2008).

2.2 The new system model

The new teaching system consists of two parts. The main body is the after class e-based self-learning system and its aid – the in-class learning materials including the textbook and PPTs. For after-class learning, e-magazines are chosen to be the best solution. It is shown as follows (Fig 1):

Fig. 1. The New System



3. The E-magazines

“English Learning for Postgraduate(HIT)” are designed to have 12 units in the book and therefore there are 12 corresponding issues of the e-magazines. It is sent to students two week before class so that they could have time to study. Each issue is carefully designed and beautifully done. They are very artistic. The icons, contents, one of the covers and one of the backs are as follows (Fig 2 to Fig 5). E-magazines are standalone .exe(executive) files and it does not need any other software to help.

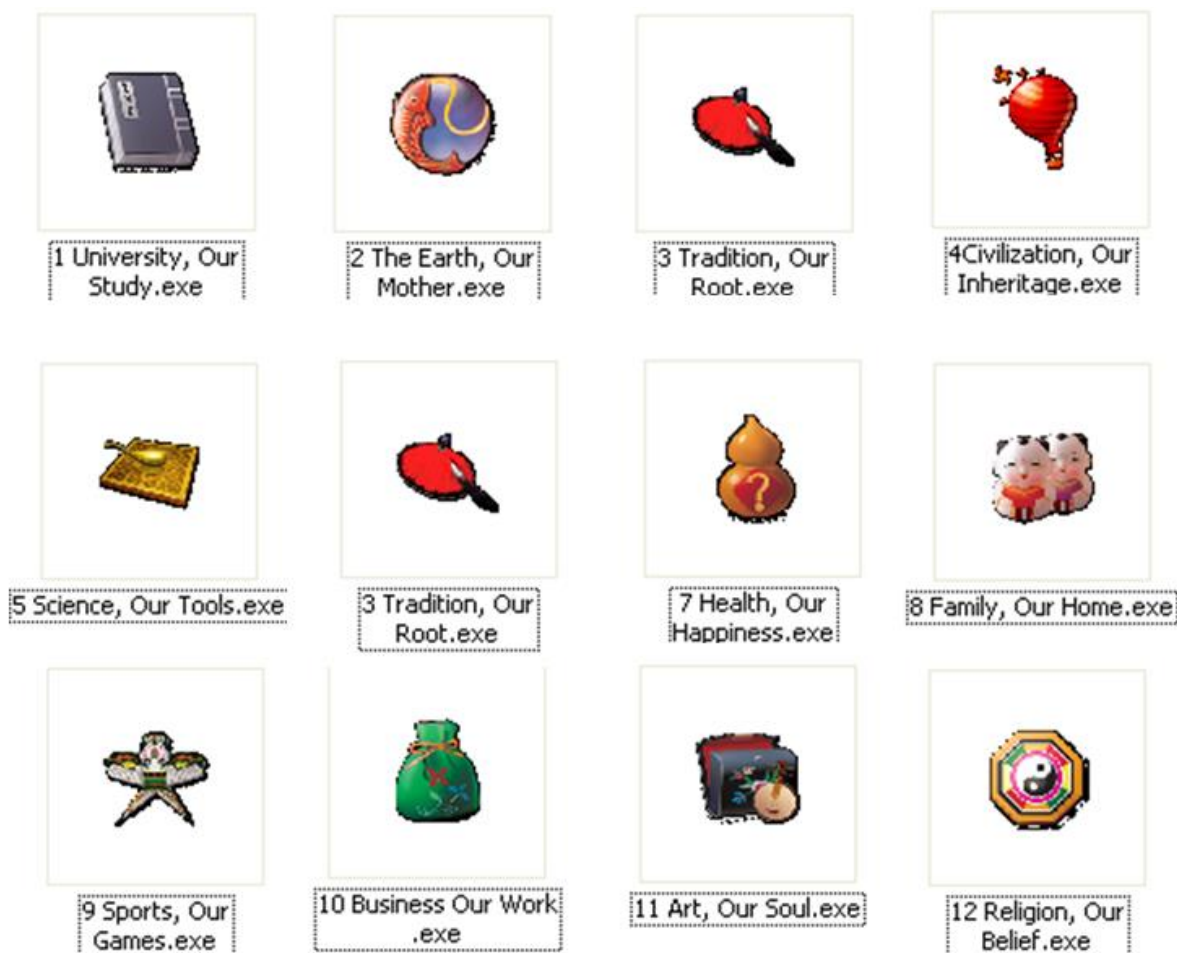


Fig. 2. Icons



Fig. 4. Cover



Fig. 5. Back



Fig. 3. Contents

Each issue has 10 fixed columns. They are Picture Reading, Do You Know..., Proverbs, Listen to It, Film Episode, Beautiful Melody, Fine Articles, Documentary Film, Animation Film and Famous Speech as shown in Fig 6.



Fig. 6. Columns



References

- [1] Gu, Y.G. The Analysis of Multimedia and Multi-modal [J]. Media in Foreign Language Instruction, 2007(2).
- [2] Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design[M]. London: Routledge, 1996.
- [3] Zhong, Z.X. Innovating the Instructional Mode in Higher Education: A perspective of Instructional Design [M].Beijing: Educational Science Publishing Company, 2008.3
- [4] Zhang, Z. A Co-relational Study of Multimodal PPT Presentation and Students' Learning Achievements[J] FLC, 2005 Vol.7 No.3
- [5] Guichon, N. & S. McLornan. The effects of multimodality on L2 learners: Implications for CALL resource design [J]. System, 2008, 36.
- [6] New London Group. A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures [J]. Harvard Educational Review, 1996,66(1): 60-90.
- [7] Royce, T. Multimodality in the TESOL classroom: Exploring visual-verbal synergy [J]. TESOL Quarterly, 2002,36 (2):191-205.
- [8] Stein, P. Rethinking resources: Multimodal pedagogies in the ESL classroom[J]. TESOL Quarterly, 2000,34 (2): 333-336.