Online Environment in Language Skills Development

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Abstract

Online environment offers wider horizons than a face-to-face learning in the classroom can offer. It provides time and space that often lack in everyday learning situations. The study demonstrates how implementation of online elements into school syllabus helps to improve language skills of lower secondary learners. It aims to show that learners are able to direct their language development if they are given a prompt and an appropriate learning environment. Learners of an elementary school took part in one-year experimental use of online reading environment with the aim to monitor their learning habits, reflect on their work and present the content in their regular lessons. The study presents the data collected via qualitative methods: interviews (learners and teachers) and content analysis (reading protocols, reading journals). The results show significant growth in interest to work on language skills development outside of the classroom as well as willingness to participate in the classroom activities based on online learning tasks. The findings also reveal improvement in using language for reading protocols and journals at the level of vocabulary growth and partially at the accuracy level as well.

Keywords: *online learning environment, language skills, reading, reflection, self-directed learning;*

1 Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language has experienced many changes and challenges in Slovakia in the last years. In 2008 teaching of foreign languages became compulsory at primary level and three years later the choice of the first compulsory foreign language was limited to English. However, after ten years it seems that despite this shift to early language learning, the language proficiency of students, especially in lower secondary education, is still inadequate and does not reach an output level A2 [1] of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Lower secondary education in Slovakia seems to be rather conservative and resistant to change and innovation. It demonstrates a low level of stimuli present in language teaching and is heavily based on textbooks as well as the traditional approach towards language teaching. There is a huge lack of meaningfulness in the activities that students are asked to carry out and thus a rather limited personalisation of the acts.

This study focuses on possibilities of enrichment of the language learning environment in order to intensify the learning experience via online reading programmes. The aim of this study was to use the experience of similar studies [2] and to find out whether the inclusion of an online learning environment would represent a higher stimulus for using the target language and at the same time whether there would help to improve the language skills of the students. It presents the outcomes of a longitudinal research project with the aim of verifying the applicability of online reading programmes with incorporated activities for the development of productive language skills in the real context of elementary schools and to determine the significance of the impact such programmes would have on the development of language production. Online reading programme was implemented into a year plan of five experimental groups. Students were expected to produce linguistic meanings that were motivated by their own interests within a wider contextual framework. At the same time the interest of the study was also to identify learners´ attitudes towards the online learning supplement and the level of motivation for this practice.

2 Reading and skills development

Reading in a foreign language is a complex process which has many specific aspects. Approaches to reading as a process and in the same way approaches to teaching reading in a foreign language classroom have changed over the last few decades from that of seeing reading as a passive process of receiving information to understanding reading as an active and even interactive process [3]. An

experienced reader who has reached a certain level of automaticity uses these processes as one functioning complex. In this context Hedge [4] explains the interaction as "interplay among various kinds of knowledge that a reader employs in moving through a text." Geva and Ramírez [5] call this kind of knowledge strategic knowledge and connect it with what is typically understood as reading comprehension.

Lower secondary learners have automatized word-level reading skills and mastered sufficient fluency at the lower level, there is a wide range of higher-order strategies they need to apply. In order to "read to learn" they will be expected to demonstrate cognitive skills such as predicting, breaking down the text into details and then synthesizing the read text, summarizing, inferring from the text, drawing conclusions, identifying key arguments and supporting details, connecting prior knowledge with new facts, providing evaluation of what was read, etc. All this will require a carefully planned and systematic approach in making reading a part of every lesson and, in a wider scope, there is a need for a consistent reading programme (RP). Immersion into the target language has a profound effect on the development of individual language skills and sub-skills. The enlargement of the word stock is a natural part of this process as has been supported by many research outcomes of longitudinal studies. One such example is a case study that was conducted in the Slovak educational context at a primary school with the aim of involving young learners in levelled reading programmes [6]. The results of supported the initial hypothesis that immersion into the target language through levelled reading programmes would have an impact on vocabulary expansion and on general understanding of the language.
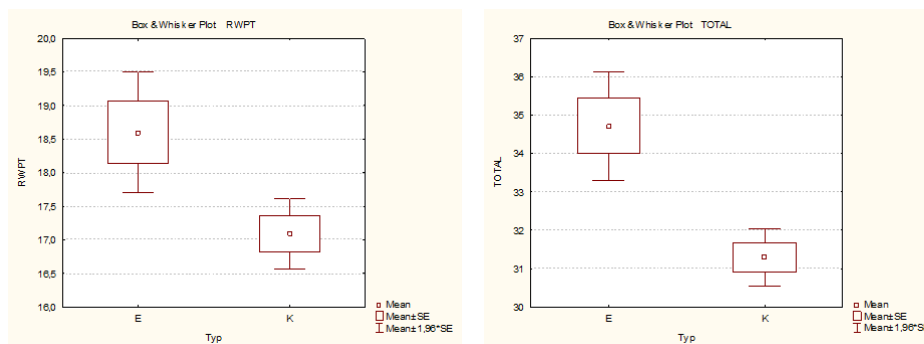

Fig. 1 Vocabulary expansion. The difference between experimental and control group at the beginning (left) and at the end (right) in a vocabulary test.

3 Reading in online learning environment

As the use of modern technology has influenced the educational context in every single aspect, teaching reading has not been left out. Today's generation of leaners at school are digital natives [7] and the use of technology for them feels like second nature. Applying technology in developing the reading skills of learners requires a modification of reading strategies used by the reader in comparison with a traditional reading process based on the printed material. The question of text difficulty or appropriateness will be considered more often in a classroom where teacher uses technological devices than in a traditional classroom since the sources, at any proficiency or authenticity level, are open to the learners at any time. This can be viewed as an advantage on the one hand because the intensity of exposure to the target language is incomparable in this way. At the same time, however, we need to be aware that both systemic and schematic knowledge are challenged much more while using open sources and Krashen's term *comprehensible input* [8] has a huge relevance in this situation. Learners can become discouraged by the incomprehensibility of the text, especially when facing authentic texts.

At present there are many opportunities to involve learners in using online libraries. Some of them offer a mere selection of books for reading, some, on the other hand, have a complete task management for both learners and teachers. Learners can enter such a virtual learning environment via personalised access; they can see their own progress and enjoy bonuses awarded by the teacher. Such environment even allows for communication between the learner and the teacher so the learners can be guided even though they work independently of the teacher. Teachers, on the other hand, can see a complete overview of the learner's attempts in reading, task accomplishment, recording of their

own reading aloud, etc. Teachers can even invite parents to see their children´s progress in order to motivate them and support them. This is vital especially in lower-level reading programmes.

4 Methodology

This study focused on the implementation of online reading programmes into the curriculum of lower secondary learners. The experiment with 150 learners (72 in experimental and 78 in a control group) of 5th and 6th grade at elementary school comprised of systematic reading books in online library as well as experiencing one lesson per week as a follow up session after reading a part of the book online. The books were selected by the teachers and assigned to the learners for a certain period of time. The follow-up activities were designed to address the development of language skills and their practice. They focused on the development of language skills. The learners were tested before and after the experiment so that their progress could be measured. The test focused on learners´ response to visual or written stimulus. After the experiment learners and teachers were also involved in an interview addressing their experience during the online learning and in order to record their attitudes towards using online learning elements. The experiment lasted for one school year.

4.1 Findings and discussion
In order to analyze the performance of the CG and EG the descriptive statistics of the total scores was used for each group. Based on the descriptive statistics of the total mean scores of all learners (CG 52,19% and EG 63,07%) at pre-testing at the beginning of the experiment and their mean scores (65,4% and 82,69%, respectively) at post-testing after completing the reading programme, it can be concluded that performance in the test after the experiment was better in both groups. This fact is not surprising since all learners made some progress within a school year. However, while the difference between the CG and EG in pre-test was 10,88%, it was 17,29% after the experiment in post-test stage. The values of the t-test used show that there is a significant difference in the results of the two groups in favour of the EG. This finding supports the assumption that an online RP would have a positive impact on the learners' performance.
In interviews students expressed that they found the experience positive and motivating and asked for continuation. They did not consider online learning an extra burden and appreciated more space and time they had for handling the task. The students expressed their belief that their language improved significantly in this year and they felt more secure in using the target language. Teachers, who were monitoring students´ progress via reading journals as well as the learners´ behaviour in the lessons supported this fact by stating that even lower achievers had a tendency to accomplish online tasks in comparison to textbook tasks and they also participated actively in the lessons more.
Findings demonstrated that an involvement of online RP has a huge potential to deepen learning experience. The results also support the assumption that inclusion of online RP will influence not only the language progress of the learners but also their attitudes towards learning. In general it can be concluded that online RP as a supplement of the learning space resulted in a significant rise in motivation to be involved in practising the target language and in consideration of this practice as more meaningful and more enjoyable than typical textbook-based practice.

5 Conclusion

This study focused on the implementation of online RP into a regular EFL classroom. It was assumed that online RP a regular component of foreign language teaching can serve as a generator of higher involvement and desire of learners to immerse into the target language and produce meaningful outcomes. The findings of the research bring encouraging conclusions and suggest, it is crucial to supplement language teaching with input which allows for deep immersion into the target language and use this input for generating desirable outcomes. Therefore, online RP can provide the extent of exposure which is necessary for generating interest and personal involvement on the part of the learner.

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