Enhancing Students' Motivation with On-line Teaching Practices: Putting Theory into Practice

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Abstract

This paper reports on a one-year longitudinal study that adopted a blended teaching approach based on designing and implementing an online EFL course to be used by students aged 13-16 years old along their more traditional face-to-face lessons. The reason for creating a more dynamic learning environment aligned with the rest of the curriculum was to increase EFL learners' engagement and motivation through their exposure to authentic material and participation in real-life tasks. To this end, a number of online activities were designed including: a) an on-line classroom with hand-outs, extra activities, resources and discussion groups for students to further develop their digital literacy along with their English language competence, b) a wiki for students to make a contribution and post their own messages on a specific topic, c) a series of Skype *group discussions with invited external guest speakers, d) a private* YouTube *space for students to upload their videos and watch relevant EFL material. Data analysis of pre- and post-tests on reading and writing performance along with students' questionnaires showed that open online access technologies gave EFL participants the opportunity to enhance their reading and writing skills while developing their critical thinking and collaboration skills. The paper concludes by highlighting the fact that online class components were not designed* around the tools*, attempting to fit the online tools into a task-based EFL lesson, but rather* served the learning objectives of the actual lesson *based* on *a blended teaching approach, in which face-to-face and online learning activities were relevant to and complemented one another*. Careful planning proved to be one of the most important components of teaching online, since a well-planned online curriculum greatly reduced the potential for frustration and confusion during students' online language learning process. As a final word, it is worth pointing out that, although the use of technology is increasingly offering new learning and teaching opportunities, it will not automatically bring benefits and solve any existing curriculum problems. Thus, the reasons for introducing online technology into the learning environment, and the purpose that it is intended to serve needs to be carefully considered and appropriately integrated into the curriculum planning.*

1. Introduction

The Internet has significantly changed how we communicate with one another as well as how we access, share and facilitate information [1, 3, 5]. Many of us are already familiar with Internet-based communication technologies and have comfortably integrated it into our daily life. Understanding the place of online learning in digitally facilitated social interaction, professional practice and education is becoming increasingly important [2, 6]. While online education generally started with the use of technology as a support tool to conventional teaching methods –such as white boards, overhead projectors and word processors– it has since developed into a process or pedagogy [8, 9, 10]. The issue is no longer one of how to use technology to teach, but one where teachers acknowledge the way the world is already developing, and understand the significance of online literacy and the role that collaboration and online engagement plays in student learning and their future workplace environment [4, 6, 7]. Software and technology changes very rapidly, and it can be difficult to keep up with these developments. It is important therefore to focus on understanding effective pedagogical strategies for online teaching rather than the technology itself, which can be applied, adapted and transferred between various software platforms and disciplines [5, 6].

2. Research: Methodology & Findings

The one-year study adopted a blended teaching approach that was based on designing and implementing an online EFL course to be used by students aged 13-16 years old along their more traditional face-to-face lessons. The reason for creating a more dynamic learning environment aligned with the rest of the curriculum was to increase EFL learners' engagement and motivation through their exposure to authentic material and participation in real-life tasks. To this end, a number of online activities were designed including: a) an on-line classroom with hand-outs, extra activities, resources

and discussion groups for students to further develop their digital literacy along with their English language competence, b) a wiki for students to make a contribution and post their own messages on a specific topic, c) a series of *Skype* group discussions with invited external guest speakers, d) a private *YouTube* space for students to upload their videos and watch relevant EFL material. Data analysis of pre- and post-tests on reading and writing performance along with students' questionnaires showed that open online access technologies gave EFL participants the opportunity to enhance their reading and writing skills while developing their critical thinking and collaboration skills. The Learning Objectives of this blended course were Students to: a) activate any prior knowledge on different kinds of food, b) learn new vocabulary related to eating and cooking, c) talk about different kinds of food, d) learn how to give cooking instructions and e) talk and write about healthy and unhealthy eating habits. The expected Learning Outcomes were Ss to: a) bring in class any prior knowledge and experience and express and exchange ideas with their classmates regarding eating habits/ cooking/ recipes, b) practice their skimming and scanning skills by reading or listening to relevant info, c) familiarize themselves with new vocabulary related to giving cooking instructions and writing a recipe, d) use "the new language" in socially meaningful tasks, e) increase their intercultural awareness by being exposed to eating habits, foods and recipes from various countries.

The online class components consisted of: a) a free on-line Omnium class (http://omniumclass.com) with on-line handouts, extra activities, resources and discussion groups for my students to further develop their digital literacy along with their English language competence. My students (registered users with controlled access) could revise information presented in the classroom (handouts and video lectures), do extra online activities such as quizzes, have access to online resources and add their comments/suggestions/ideas for projects, topics they would like to talk about in our face-to-face lessons, b) a wiki on *Healthy & Unhealthy Eating Habits* (https://www.wikispaces.com) and, once having explained to my students the benefits of using a new online teaching tool and guided them into using the platform, I asked them to make a contribution and post their own messages on the specific topic. They individual contribution to the specific wiki formed part of their classroom evaluation so students were more than willing to post their comments and share their thoughts and knowledge with their classmates, c) Skype was used to set up a guided group meeting (participation and time-limit rules were clearly explained in advance) and invited external guest speakers (chefs, food scientists, dieticians) to contribute to our English Language classroom by discussing with my students different aspects of healthy eating, an experience that my students really enjoyed, since they had the chance to talk to various professionals from all over the world, d) Flickr was used to upload food and cooking related images and asked my students to add their own photos to our Classroom Food gallery, and finally e) students were asked to create their own cooking videos (record themselves giving cooking instructions on their favourite food while preparing it with the help of an adult) to be posted in a private YouTube space and shared only with their classmates By using video analytics in YouTube, I was this way able to identify patterns in how my students accessed and watched relevant material.

3. Discussion & Concluding Remarks

Without doubt, in order to effectively implement open online technologies in my EFL classroom, I had to carefully consider my students' privacy and ask official permission from the head of my institution along with written parental consent for my students to have controlled access (registered users) to the above-mentioned online tools. From my experience as an EFL teacher, I have to admit that open access technologies have proved particularly convenient to use in my teaching context given the lack of state funds and the reluctance from the head of my institution to invest on modern technologies. Using open technologies such as YouTube, Flickr and Omnium Class, my foreign language students enhanced their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills while practicing their critical thinking and collaboration skills through their participation in online discussion forums. From my point of view, the benefits of using freely available open technologies was that most of my high-school students were already familiar with these environments so system implementation and student engagement ran smoothly, while I was able to set up these learning environments myself without having to spend any money or go through a more complex institutional administrative process. In addition, because other schools in my country were using similar systems, it was easy to collaborate with them, as there were no software compatibility issues. As external users could be added manually by me without going through institutional procedures, I was also able to invite external guest speakers to contribute to our English Language classroom, an experience my students really enjoyed since they had the chance to talk to various professionals from all over the world. Data analysis of pre- and post-tests on reading and writing performance along with students' questionnaires showed that open online access

technologies gave EFL participants the opportunity to enhance their reading and writing skills while developing their critical thinking and collaboration skills.

In a nutshell, my online class components were not designed around the tools, attempting to fit the online tools into my lesson, but rather served the learning objectives of my lesson based on a blended teaching approach, in which face-to-face and online learning activities were relevant to and complemented one another. To sum up, from my point of view, careful planning is one of the most important components of teaching online, since a well-planned and carefully balanced online curriculum is much easier to manage, and greatly reduces the potential for frustration and confusion during students' online learning process. Having said that, the set of online activities presented above served the learning objectives of my curriculum, i.e. increased my EFL students' engagement and motivation through their exposure to authentic material (videos, food articles, seminars, etc.) and participation in real-life tasks (wikis, discussion forums on eating habits, etc.). As a final word, it is worth pointing out that, although the use of technology is increasingly offering new learning and teaching opportunities, it will not automatically bring benefits and solve any existing curriculum problems. Thus, the reasons for introducing technology into the learning environment, and the purpose that it is intended to serve needs to be carefully considered and appropriately integrated into the curriculum planning.

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