

Utilizing Digital Resources To Foster Young Learners' Engagement In Online Learning Classrooms

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Abstract

Young Learners' engagement is a key factor in determining successful teaching and learning. Teachers have to differentiate their teaching approach in order to maximize students' motivation. Especially, many educators try harder to gain more students' engagement in online learning after the school closure affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to stimulate students' motivation, teachers are required to deploy various digital resources on the Internet. However, teachers have been facing challenges in utilizing relevant and sufficient online materials to facilitate and engage learners in the learning process, which results in increasing learning productivity. Thus, this article aims to propose some practical teaching techniques using digital resources to foster engagement of young learners in online learning classrooms.

Keywords: online learning, students' engagement, digital resources

1. Introduction

According to B&Company Vietnam & BEAN Survey team (2020), by 20th April 2020, more than one billion students have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. However, learning hasn't been disrupted by school closure thanks to online learning with the assistance of technology. Over the past two years, about 22 million students in Vietnam have attended online classes due to the pandemic outbreak. According to Duong (2021), 7.35 million students were reported to study online in September 2021, owing to the lockdown. Although both educators and learners have not much experience in teaching and learning online, they may be familiar with video learning that is totally different from teaching and learning online using a platform connected with the Internet. Moreover, some teachers and students refuse to participate in this procedure because they have not received much well-prepared training. It is obviously true that teachers will struggle to manage the students and engage them to learn through screens. Therefore, in this article, the authors are trying to bring some suggestions of utilizing digital resources to encourage learners to learn more effectively.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online Learning

Online learning and e-learning are used to describe distance education, but now they have become more popular terms to mention the teaching and learning process that happened through online platforms with the use of the Internet. According to Taylor (2001, p. 2), online learning has been known as a "fifth-generation" version of distance education which is "designed to capitalize on the features of the Internet and the Web." It means that education procedures are being taken place by instructors who facilitate students' learning with interactive elements, engage students with various activities that match students' learning styles, and encourage students to learn collaboratively and critically through a platform (Tapscott, 2009).

In fact, online learning is bringing a lot of benefits for learners and instructors in the way of its operations. It meets the demand of the greater student population and enhances students' digital skills. Moreover, students can learn anytime and *anywhere*, and they are able to interact with their classmates or teachers through virtual conferences or discussion forums. According to Cathy and Farah (2020), research has proven the effectiveness of online learning with access to the right technology. On average, about 25-60% more learning materials can be retained from learning online than traditional learning. Students also take less time to learn online than in a traditional classroom owing to self-paced learning based on their academic preferences and learning styles.

However, research shows that both teachers and students have been challenged with online learning regarding technical issues, improper training for online teaching, inappropriate online testing systems as well as lack of interaction and engagement (Cathy and Farah, 2020).

2.2. Young learners' engagement

Student engagement addresses problems regarding low achievement, less motivation, and high dropout rates (Shukor et al., 2014). In the light of other research, Dixson (2015) indicated student engagement is, generally, the extent to which students actively engage by thinking, talking, and interacting with the content of a course, the other students in the course, and the instructor. Student engagement is a key element in keeping students connected with the course and, thus, with their learning". To engage students in online learning, teachers should have their students be proactive participants, encourage them to collaborate with each other, and make learning fun. Technology in general and digital resources, in particular, are beneficial for increasing student engagement. Many e-learning resources have included e-learning platforms, applications, software, and websites that facilitate learning. However, the inability to deploy online resources or overusing various digital resources may result in the failure to engage students in virtual classrooms. Selecting and deploying suitable digital resources to increase student engagement requires digital knowledge, skills, and teaching experience.

Young learners are known as any students whose range of ages and developmental stages of children from infants, young children, and older children. One of the major characteristics of young learners is their short attention span which they may have full attention for about 10 to 15 minutes (McKay, 2006). That explains why students can only gain their learning from direct learning, real objects, interesting media, and visual aids (Harmer, 2007). Meanwhile, it is important for teachers to be aware that the mood of young children tends to change every other minute, and they are easily bored, but they are very active, curious, and willing to learn new things. Then, when teaching them, teachers are advised to use some expressive and purposeful media to increase their motivation (Brumfit et al., 2003). Moreover, Cameron (2001) also explains that the activities, media, and materials that the teachers provide for teaching young learners have to fit with students' interests rather than the teachers' interests. Similarly, Sukarno (2008) states that the media and activities should capture children's interest and curiosity. Hence, it is extremely prerequisite for educators to select, modify and rebuild resources, especially digital resources, in teaching online.

2.3. Digital resources

It is clear to see that students are interested in the material presented. They will engage and learn more. It means that learners will learn best only if teachers bring authentic and creative materials in the classroom, which play an important role in conveying the value and importance of the information. Especially in the virtual learning classroom, materials that teachers make on the Web are called digital resources. On the Internet, digital resources can be information that helps students widen their understanding, or they can be a procedure that teachers can use many different useful Internet tools to help learners study. Similarly, Shariful (2010, p.24) states that “Digital resources or digital information resources are those resources whose deal with both born-digital and digitized materials which can be either accessible from library’s in house database or from the world-wide-web, in that case, materials must have to preserve the copyright law, for both the born-digital and digitized format, some resources will be permissible to furnish information in full text and others will be limited to metadata and some resources will be freely accessible for anyone from anywhere in the world and others will have limited accessibility due to the library's policy and for cost-related issues and also for the authentication.”. In fact, Van et al. (2021) found that students achieved improvement in language skills, especially speaking skill (57%) and writing skill (31%) thanks to utilizing "educational apps, smartphones, Audio tools, Computer (75.30%, 60.80%, 19.40%, and 19.10% respectively)" (p. 38).

However, there are some considerations for teachers to pay more attention to using digital resources in their classes. First of all, when selecting digital resources and planning their use, teachers have already considered the lesson and learning objective, context, approach, learner styles, and learning environment. Secondly, it is clear that not all materials from the Internet are appropriate for every single type of class. As a result, instructors need to modify and construct the existing openly licensed resources to create or co-create new digital educational resources matched with lesson objectives as well as learner groups. Actually, many teachers are using the irrelevant resources that have already been made and shared by others and applying them to their classes. Consequently, it may bring back so many drawbacks that the learners wonder what they are doing. Lastly, with online learning, teachers should organize digital content and make it available to learners with the respect and correct application of privacy and copyright rules. That's the reason why teachers need to be aware of the importance of utilizing digital resources to foster young learners' engagement because of unlimited and uncontrollable resources from the Internet. The following session will suggest some practice Internet websites and tools that instructors can utilize to modify, create and recreate the digital resources for their young learners.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Classroom management

3.1.1 ClassDojo

ClassDojo (<http://classdojo.com>) is a popular tool and a free virtual classroom management web or mobile app that serves as a digital class folder. Teachers can submit students' portfolios to keep track of their characteristics or learning style as well as to create records of their behaviors during the class with multiple behavior categories (Rivera, 2019). It is not only good for teachers to follow students' learning progress with very effective functions such as general attendance checks, random names, or timers, but it is also great for students and parents to know how they are performing in the class.

Certainly, with the rewarding system, ClassDojo aims to maintain a positive learning

environment that encourages and reinforces the whole class or individual learners to perform desirable behaviors. It is also very personalized by allowing students to input and select behaviors that are worth it. As a result, it can shape learners' collaboration and engagement learning environment. More importantly, students are stimulated to work with groups to achieve particular goals that further enhance their academic performance in a positive way in the future.

3.1.2 Virtual badges

Virtual badges (<https://badge.design/>) is one of many websites to create virtual stickers, certificates, and badges, which are known as its heart, a student-centered strategy. It can help students see how to achieve a goal with a reward or how they try better next time to win those rewards that are parts of the learning process. Another advantage of getting virtual badges is to prove their accomplishment or skill achieved displayed online and share to everyone all over the world. This Internet tool helps instructors modify and design their own rewarding systems to match their learners' style or learning objectives. Obviously, it becomes a more achievable goal for students to work in groups or individuals to win the badges designed to their own values and styles.

3.2 Teaching vocabulary

According to Coady & Huckin (1997), vocabulary plays a crucial central role in language and critical importance to the typical language learner. Hornby (2004) also stated that a vocabulary is a total number of words in a language that is used by a person that helps learners to be able to understand and pick up the meaning of the conversation or the reading text. By learning vocabulary, the students can add many new words that have been known or unknown before and are used in their daily activities. In the normal class setting, teachers have to use many different techniques to teach vocabulary; for instance, using flashcards, drawing on the board, or real objects to present the vocabulary meaning and playing face to face games to practice the vocabulary.

However, using the appropriate and effective digital resources to teach vocabulary becomes more important in the digital world. It requires an instructor to present the vocabulary through the screen in an effective way that motivates them to learn and helps them get involved in learning. Using flashcards is one of many ways to teach vocabulary. According to Baleghizadeh & Ashoori (2011), a flashcard is cardboard consisting of a word, a sentence, or a simple picture. Now, teachers can create or recreate it with a digital flashcard their own flashcards using the Internet tools.

3.2.1 Cram.com

Cram.com (www.cram.com) is known as Flashcard Exchange, a web-based application for creating, studying and sharing flashcards. Teachers can create a set of flashcards by using pictures in the front and typing the text in the back. It is also great for learners to enhance their learning autonomy by adding voice or sound for vocabulary pronunciation. Moreover, the website also designs some gamified vocabulary activities from these sets of vocabulary flashcards that teachers have designed. Teachers can get students to play some memory games or matching games using these flashcards during the teaching procedure. Moreover, at home, students can do self-learning by making their own flashcards then challenging their friends to find which one set is the best. The last benefit of this Internet tool is its convenience which means instructors can use and reuse, edit, modify and share to anyone at any time and anywhere.

3.3 Teaching grammar

Grammar is one of the language aspects of teaching and learning the language. Its role in second language teaching is apparent. The grammatical devices of a language are necessary means to support learners to link all their ideas systematically to express meaning. Moreover, it requires teachers to understand a wide range of techniques to develop grammar teaching strategies to suit specific learner characteristics. In the end, it helps learners effectively apply their grammar understanding and knowledge in a communicative context, and it is also the main objective of teaching grammar. Therefore, as teaching online, teachers need to pay more attention to exploring and utilizing the digital resources to produce grammar worksheets and grammar games to make students practice grammar points to communicate in a context.

3.3.1 Board games – Tools for Educators

Board gameplay is an important role in teaching because it is a good activity for students to practice language, but it is also useful for them to work on social and cognitive skills.

While playing a board game, students have to participate, reinforce language contents, language aspects and language skills to play. According to the General Education Curriculum updated in 2019 by the Educational Department, board games are one of the main pillars of teaching in schools because they stimulate learners and provide context for them to generate language to use in situations (Casas, 2020). Meanwhile, Wright (2006) states that it is a great way for students to consistently practice their language skills using communication with other players participating in the board game.

The website called Tools for Educators (www.toolsforeducators.com) is to provide teachers with an excellent tool to personalize the Board Game with different aims for different lessons. All teachers need to do is to choose the "Board Game" function and submit the requests for students to complete. For instance, they have to make three different sentences using relative clauses, or they can have bonus points to move up a few spaces. The activity can be done in groups as competitive games and cooperative games, which emphasize winning or losing, but it makes the players try their best to work well with their teams to end up with the best results.

3.4 Teaching language skills

Fundamental language skills include receptive and productive skills that are also known as passive and active skills. Receptive skills defining a learner's ability to receive and understand the language input are reading and listening skills, whereas productive skills, including speaking and listening skills, enable learners to produce language by using speech or text (Sreena and Ilankumaran, 2018). Despite the categories, the four language skills are correlated and should be integrated to develop communication.

3.4.1 Teaching receptive skills

Receptive skills engage learners in reading and listening tasks. According to Saricoban (1999, as cited by Nomads, 2013), listening is defined as the ability to understand the speaker's accent, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. When teaching listening skills in virtual classrooms, teachers have been encountering challenges in properly maximizing technology for online teaching and making good preparation for suitable teaching materials (Susilowati, 2020). In order to overcome the difficulties of teaching listening online, Yilmaz and Yavuz (2015) suggest teaching phonetics by utilizing engaging listening activities and

examining similar sounds or pairs. Furthermore, learners should be provided with authentic language for practical input to speak with their friends, play digital games through listening lessons.

3.4.1.1 Teaching listening and reading

Reading is a significant skill that enables learners to understand a written text based on their vocabulary and background knowledge in the second language. In addition, reading enables learners to improve vocabulary, learn new ideas, and develop their knowledge (Constantinescu, 2007, as cited by Nomads, 2013). In the digital world, Pasaribu (2020) proposed that students can have access to reading materials and activities available online to choose their texts, adjust their reading time, strategies and monitor their progress thanks to self-assessment. One of the five ways to develop digital literacies for young learners that Castek et al. (2006) suggested is utilizing online stories on the Web. Online stories are engaging and interactive tools to get learners motivated with reading and enhance literacy skills.

With the purpose of developing receptive skills, this research recommends some digital resources, including online stories, videos, interactive listening, and reading games, to educators and learners. In light of the findings, Vega (2019) emphasizes the significance of teaching "concepts of print, phonemic awareness, and phonics" at a young age to build a basic foundation for reading skills.

3.4.1.2 Kiz phonics

Kiz phonics (<https://www.kizphonics.com>) is a website to help teachers focus more on practicing students' receptive skills. On the basis of a synthetic phonics approach, the Kiz Phonics curriculum offers a complete set of activities structured by levels for preschool, kindergarten, first, and second-grade learners. Using Kiz Phonics worksheets, phonics games, phonics flashcards, listening materials, word families' activities, phonics short stories, phonics lesson videos, and PowerPoint, young learners find joy in learning to read by combining letters to form sounds, reading unfamiliar words. This Kidz Phonics website facilitates teaching and learning Phonics as a beginning step of developing receptive skills by enabling educators and learners to select suitable phonics activities for all learning styles. Teachers can choose the levels and use resources to teach listening and reading at some teaching stages, including presentation and practice. Moreover, teachers don't need to make any preparations for lesson plans, PowerPoint Presentations, and worksheets, thanks to the available resources on the Kiz Phonics website. After using songs, stories for context setting, and PowerPoint for sound presentation, teachers can implement interactive games for young learners to practice engaging sounds and words. Finally, teachers can monitor their students with individual worksheets. Eventually, Kiz Phonics is an excellent progressive program to teach kids to read using a synthetic phonics approach.

3.4.2 Teaching productive skills

Productive skills - known as active skills, require language learners to transmit and produce information in either written or spoken form (Golkova and Hubackova, 2014). Scholars prove that productive skills and receptive skills are inseparable and unsuccessfully developed without integration. Furthermore, Golkova and Hubackova (2014) point out a mutual relationship of speaking and writing skills as well as engaging methods to develop productive skills with the assistance of technology. In fact, digital resources and competencies create opportunities for learners to increase their critical thinking, creativity, develop their communication, and "collaboratively build new knowledge" (Julie, 2014, p. 38).

3.4.2.1 Teaching speaking

Nomass (2013) defines speaking as communication requiring spoken language. Some scholars point out linguistic components that are essential for developing speaking skills based on accuracy and fluency. According to Negoescu et al. (2021), accuracy involves grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, whereas fluency refers to “the intonation, the speech rate, and the stress” (p. 162). Moreover, Nomass (2013) suggests using "Speech Synthesis Programs Modern computer programs" to "generate voice signals and decode human sound. These programs are defined as artificial intelligence computer programs and can be a useful tool for improving speaking capability. Practicing with such programs will strengthen vocabulary and pronunciation abilities as well" (p. 114). Eventually, based on Nguyen and Vo's (2021 p. 83) research, the result indicates the participants improved their language skills by using the English learning applications, including Elsa Speak, Duolingo, and BBC learning.

The researchers also point out significant benefits of maximizing the use of those apps in language learning in terms of their features such as “free-option” and accessibility. However, educators have struggled with interacting with individual students for language checks to ensure speaking accuracy and fluency when teaching speaking online.

3.4.2.2 Speechace

For pronunciation check, accuracy, and fluency enhancement, Speechace is one of the best solutions. The speech act is designed to develop in-class speech recognition technology which aims to help learners develop their speaking skills. Their vision is to make practicing and improving speaking attainable without intensive one-on-one instruction, which allows learners to practice pronunciation. This browser is beneficial to students' reception of accurate pronunciation of sounds, words, phrases, and sentences and recording their voice by repeating the words or sentences. *Speech act* technology also gives feedback, which monitors learners' progress by checking their pronunciation mistakes, listening to the samples, and learning how to make accurate pronunciation. After the uploaded voice is checked automatically in a computerized process, learners are informed of the percentage of native-like pronunciation (Moxon, 2021). Additionally, this website supplies learners with speaking topics or pronunciations for a language review, which is appropriate for learning levels. With the support of technology, especially artificial intelligence, the function of speech recognition allows learners to record their voices and receive speech analysis in speaking activities graded by levels.

3.4.2.3 Teaching writing

According to Nomass (2013), the writing process is challenging to learners regarding brainstorming and organizing ideas by using grammar and vocabulary correctly. Similarly, Selvarasu et al. (2021) state teaching writing includes relating students' prior knowledge, using vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and writing styles. In virtual writing classes, Selvarasu et al. (2021) advocate that virtual writing is ineffective due to a lack of monitoring, feedback giving, and peer assessment in the online class. As a result, language learners, specifically at a young age, are not engaged in writing activities or motivated to do their written work. The following parts are going to suggest some productive skill tools for teachers to engage students in virtual classrooms.

3.4.2.4 Book creator

Book Creator (<https://bookcreator.com/>) is a free website for everyone who wants to practice their writings skill to use. It is a convenient tool for teachers to improve students' writing skills. Teachers can easily assign writing tasks for students to write in the class or at home, and they can mark them later when students share their works. Moreover, in writing virtual classrooms, students are guided to create their own written work, including interactive comics, stories, digital portfolios, and publish online. Then, they are enabled to share their writing and read their friends' books. This website also allows users to insert images, audio, and video that can enhance their creative skills to make interactive stories or books. That's the reason why *Book creator* is a good tool for teachers to facilitate language reinforcement in a fun and engaging way.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Internet benefits to the teaching and learning process are undeniable. Especially when education is switched from offline to online in the pandemic time, it becomes more vital to retain students' engagement in their learning through screens. In this study, the authors have stressed the need to leverage and utilize digital resources, which is tremendously beneficial to students if teachers devote more time to selecting, modifying, producing, and recreating the relevant digital supplements. With the good strategy using effective digital resources, teachers deliver their lesson livelily and boost students' engagement through screen effectively.

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