

Online Language Teaching and Learning: Focusing on the Pedagogical Benefits

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Abstract

The advent of new technologies has striking influence on the teaching and learning environment; as a consequence of this, online education has shown significant growth and become a reality of life. In the same vein, the increased use of appropriate technologies in language teaching and learning has encouraged many schools and educators to implement online language learning to create a flexible learning environment for learners. The rise of online language learning has provided many advantages for learners such as accessibility of time and place, small-group oriented learning, enhancement of self-management skills, setting independent goals for language proficiency development, reducing experience of fear and anxiety, development of self-confidence, and improvement of creativity. This paper focuses on the key aspects of online language teaching and learning and attempts to explore its potential contributions to language development.

Keywords: Online language Learning, Availability, Flexibility, Face-to-face Instruction

Introduction

Technology-based education has noticeable impact on the learning and teaching environment. As a consequence, online education has become a reality of life to respond to the demands of time and place-bound learners. Recently, the number of schools offering online education has been increasing (Ni, 2013). Moreover, online education enrollments outpace traditional classroom enrollment nationwide (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Ni, 2013). With the boom of technological tools, online learning has become an educational alternative for learners. Online learning is defined as the “learning that takes place partially or entirely over the Internet. This definition excludes purely print-based correspondence education, broadcast television or radio, videoconferencing, videocassettes, and stand-alone educational software programs which do not have a significant Internet-based instructional component” (Means et al., 2009, p.9). While some studies indicated that learners in online settings perform better than face-to-face learners (Zhang et al., 2004; Bourelle et al., 2016), others demonstrated that learners who receive face-to-face instruction outperform online learners (Heppen et al., 2017). Also, some other studies found that there are no significant differences in the outcomes of learners both who attend face-to-face classes and take online courses (Ni, 2013).

On the one hand, online learning has been found effective for its potential to provide flexibility, convenience and personalized learning (Swan et al., 2000): on the other hand, there are growing concerns about this new platform for creating frustration, confusion (Hara & Kling, 2000), and isolation (Brown, 1996). The extensive use of information and communication technology has also transformed the way of language learning. In the field of language education, the use of latest web tools has spread rapidly and online language learning has caught the attention of schools and educators. As a consequence of this, the increased use of appropriate technologies in language education encouraged schools to implement online language learning for creating a flexible learning environment. This study focuses on the key aspects of online language learning and attempts to explore its learning outcomes.

Literature Review

Online language learning environment can provide learners exposure to rich and authentic learning opportunities. Blake (1998) states that “technology can play an important role in fostering second language acquisition by electronically increasing learners’ contact with a wide array of authentic materials” (Blake, 1998, p. 210). The use of comprehensible input holds a very important place in language learning. In light of this, online language education is potentially worthwhile source of authentic materials. Web-based instruction help learners access various learning materials which are useful to promote their language acquisition. The authentic materials are “samples that reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers” (Rogers & Medley, 1988, p. 468). Thus, being exposed to authentic learning opportunities helps learners function in the target language and process the language input effectively in real-life situations. In addition, authentic materials are conceptually and culturally dense (Crossley, et al., 2007). Hence, their delivery is supported to enable learners to become active participants in the learning process and introduce them natural language. The exposure to natural language helps learners to encounter with comprehensible input and process real language in context.

Accessibility is one of the key advantages to online language learning. Accessibility of time and place in online learning enables learners to complete their tasks from anywhere at a time of their comfort. Learners can access the same learning material countless times at their convenient time. Due to the fact that, online learners control some aspects of their learning, they demonstrate high willingness to take part in the language learning process. For example, learners can access a wide range of learning materials at times and the place of their own choosing. Furthermore, learners can choose the teaching styles that best suit their needs and access to resources that meet their level of knowledge in online language education.

With the rise of online language learning, there has been a shift “from teacher-centered approaches towards a personalized, small-group orientated, multi-dimensional model of teaching” (Sun, 2011, p. 428). In other words, “more personal, social and participatory” (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010, p. 28) pedagogies emerged. Taking part in learning is a core element of achievement. To put it another way, greater participation leads to greater explanatory and cognitive learning (Paskey, 2001). The enhancement of learner engagement in foreign language learning is one of the most significant challenges (Toyoda & Harrison, 2002). Learner engagement is defined as “the extent of students’ involvement and active participation in learning activities” (Cole & Chan, 1994, p. 259). Online learning plays a facilitative role for learners in participating and also contributes to initiating and carrying out learning activities and studying at their own pace. It is true that there is no face-to-face interaction in online learning. The limited interaction between teachers and students not only puts a significant damper on learners’ attitudes towards language learning but also has an adverse effect on their enthusiasm and motivation (Lee & Chan, 2007). However, small group collaborations in an online language learning environment improve learners’ communication and lead to higher learner satisfaction.

Bernard and Rubalcava (2000) documented two main problems of online learning; lack of communication and difficulties related to self-regulation of learning. Beldarrain (2006) states that online learning tools now make it possible for teachers to establish group collaborations and communication. Despite the difficulties of self-regulation of learning in online education, learners find an opportunity to develop responsibility for their own learning and enhance self-management skills (Hurd, 2006). Online learning allows learners to manage their learning and maintain motivation towards success. Furthermore, it prepares learners to “regulate and oversee the rate and direction of their learning to a far greater degree than classroom learners” (White, 1994, pp. 12–13). The development of learner autonomy is a major requirement for language learning achievement. It is important to note that online learning can enable learners to set their goals independently for language proficiency without teacher assistance.

This flexibility keeps learners focused on the subjects they are studying for longer periods and increase their engagement in active learning. The potential of online education has been recognized by Reinders and White, (2016) who argued that language learners are given an opportunity to exercise control over their own learning. Learners decide which activities are worth doing and enhance their freedom of choosing. The extensive range of learning materials allows learners to set their goals and select their own materials. It goes without saying that online language education can foster autonomy of learners. It is possible to mention that online language learning experience improves self-motivation of learners and drives them to pursue their goals.

In addition to self-regulation of learning, learner creativity has the advantage of developing language acquisition and gives a basis for promoting thinking and problem

solving. It gives learners a sense of purpose which is considered as a required component of language learning. One of the benefits of online language education is to create an environment which can stir up the creativity limits of learners. Learners with high creativity are encouraged to believe in their abilities for fulfilling their academic goals.

Moreover, creativity can be profitable for promoting feelings of accomplishment and ability to focus. Additionally, it involves critical thinking which is useful for learning how to solve a problem. Creativity is valuable for learners to approach a problem from different perspectives. With this in mind, online language learning can trigger learner creativity and helps them achieve better learning outcomes. With the help of creativity, learners come up with innovative ideas and develop learning strategies for language proficiency development.

Language anxiety, which is defined as ‘‘the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language’’ (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 27), can significantly influence language performance of learners. It poses a serious threat to self-esteem and achievement; as a result, it can direct learners from learning effectively. Language learners who experience fear and anxiety consistently underperform, lose faith in their ability to achieve, avoid participating in language activities and feel discouraged. Online language learning compared to face-to-face instruction creates less fear and anxiety for language learners. Usually, in online learning environment teachers create small group collaborations in which learners feel more confident. Learners are given the chance to customize their learning and have a personalized learning in online education. The implementation of online language activities through practical sources of multimedia creates a convenient learning environment. The employment of fun and engaging learning activities has influence on motivation, self-confidence, communication skills, and language learning.

Conclusion

Recently, online learning has shown significant growth and has caught the attention of many schools. A great number of studies indicate that online learning is useful for offering learners flexibility, convenience and personalized learning. Additionally, online language teaching and learning has also become increasingly popular and evolved as an educational alternative for language learners. Online language education has the potential to provide learners rich and authentic learning opportunities in which they can function in the target language. Moreover, their exposure to natural language with the help of authentic materials through online language education can trigger their participation in the learning process. In online language teaching and learning learners have freedom of choosing teaching styles and resources that best suit their needs. They can access learning materials from anywhere at their convenient time. This key advantage of online language education increase willingness of learners towards taking part in learning process. Online

learning gives learners an opportunity to set their goals independently without teacher assistance which is considered an important factor for the development of learner autonomy. Learners can enhance their self-confidence, creativity, and self-regulation by means of online language education which contributes to their problem solving, having high feelings of accomplishment, and developing strategies for language proficiency development. Online language education can provide all necessary elements learners need to promote their language development.

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