Using Digital Technology to Promote Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

Due to new technologies and development all over the world, the current situation of education, teaching and learning has to be improved in order to guarantee a high quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, It is urgent to engage university learners within the context of technology encouraging its application in their educational realm.

The shift to learner centeredness has changed the learner's role to be more motivated, independent, and responsible of his own learning. This issue has been the focal interest of many researchers in the field seeking for an effective way that will promote learner autonomy which is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning." (Little, 2007 : 15). Digital technology has emerged in the field of language teaching and learning as an effective tool that can promote learner autonomy and collaboration not only in class but also beyond classroom. (Lai, 2017). Consequently, learners can be responsible and monitor their own learning; hence, promoting their autonomous learning. However, teachers have an important role in this learning process.

The aim of this paper is to discuss why it is important to incorporate digital technology in EFL classroom, and what is its impact on teaching and learning. In addition to how it is integrated into teaching to stimulate students' interest, attention and active participation to be autonomous learners; therefore, to ensure a high quality of teaching and learning at the university level.

Keywords: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, HIGHQUALITY OF TEACHING, LEARNER AUTONOMY, LEARNER CENTERDEDNESS, UNIVERSITY LEARNERS.

Resumé

Grace aux nouvelles technologies et au développement dans le monde, la situation actuelle de l'éducation, de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage doit etre améliorée pour assurer la bonne qualité de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage. Donc il est important d'aider les apprenants pour etre engager et appliquer la technologie numérique parce qu'elle est avantageux dans leurs domaine d'éducation. Pour cela, cette recherche contribue à expliquer de quelle mesure l'insertion de la technologie numérique sera effective dans le ' EFL' contexte au niveau de l'université. Par ailleurs cet article présente la méthode de l'application de cette technique pour motiver les apprenants de participer et coopérer dans leurs processus d'apprentissage afin d'etre indépendant et autonomes ainsi les aider d'acquérir des compétences et développer ses compétences métacognitive de façon qu'assurer la qualité d'enseignement au niveau de l'université.

ملخص

ساهمت التكنولوجيا الحديثة في جميع انحاء العالم الى تطور التعليم والتعلم على حد سواء لضمان جودة التعليم. ولهذا فان جذب طلبة الجامعة الى مجال التكنولوجيا اصبح ضرورة ملحة لفضل كل ما تقدمه التكنولوجيا الرقمية من تطبيقات فورية تساعد على التعليم والتعلم. ولان الطالب اصبح محور عملية التعليم حسب المقاربات الحديثة التي تهدف الى تغيير دور الطالب من سلبي غير فعال الى دور مفعم بالحيوية والاستقلالية لكونه المسؤول الاول عن العملية التعليمية. وفي هذا الصدد يهدف هذا البحث لشرح مدى اهمية ادراج وتطبيق التكنولوجيا الرقمية في عملية التعليم وخاصة في ميدان تعليم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في الجامعة ومامدى تاثيرها على عملية التعليم والتعلم. كذلك يوضح البحث الحالي كيفية تطبيق هذه التقنية ,التكنولوجيا الرقمية, لتحفيز الطلبة للمشاركة الفعالة في عملية التعلم لتمرينهم على الاستقلالية والتحكم الذاتي في التعلم واكتساب المهارات وايضا لتطويرمهارة ماوراء المعرفة. ومن هنا يمكن القول ان هذه التقنية تساعد على ضمان جودة التعليم على المستوى الجامعي.

Introduction

Nowadays, digital technologies have revolutionized our lives and they become extensively used by people; learners, teachers, and workers in all settings. Laptops, smart phones, tablets, and computers are all used to do research, or to

communicate with friends. As learners know digital technology, it is our role as teachers to help them use what they know to enhance their learning as they can use these digital tools also beyond the classroom whether to do homework to research, or to communicate with their teachers and classmates being independent learners who are responsible for their own learning.

1-What is Digital Technology?

Digital technology is all around us. It is all types of devices such as computers, Laptops, smart, and phones, tablets that are used for practical purposes as to facilitate communication between people, to organize their work, or their study. In other words, it is all electronic tools that we use such as the internet, social media, e-mails and online sources.

2- Digital Technology in Education

Digital technology plays a crucial role in learners' and teachers' educational realm. Because of their research and limited time, they prefer to get a bundle of e-books, e-journals, articles, and information by one click and access to internet. Therefore, it helps them to work easily and rapidly. Moreover, digital technology helps learners to send their papers and projects to their supervisors via e-mail and gain immediate feedback since Professors have busy schedules. (Kapur, 2018). Hence, digital technology has an important role and has affected positively the educational field.

3-Autonomy

Lee (2016: 81) has pointed that autonomy has been defined as "the ability to take charge of one's ownlearning" according to (Holec, 1981). In addition, she adds that learner autonomy emphasizes independence and self-regulation rather than self-study or self-access .i.e. learners are responsible and can monitor their own learning. Furthermore, Little(2007) refers to learner autonomy as 'independent learning', 'critical thinking', so learner autonomy now seemed to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves. That is when learners are independent, they are developing their language skills towards proficiency as a goal. However, how can learners promote their autonomy in order to achieve proficiency and to ensure a high quality of teaching?

Moreover, Scharle and Szabo (2000: 3) claim that responsible learners are those who whenever fail to do their homework, they are aware of missing an

opportunity to expand their knowledge of the foreign language. They do that because they consciously monitor their own progress and seize every opportunity for their benefits.

4-The Importance of Digital Technology to Promote Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy, a significant element in language learning, has gained the attention of many scholars and linguists in the field. Referring to Lai (2017) the emergence of technology and its development becomes an opportunity to promote learner autonomy not only in the classroom but also beyond the classroom because learners, the digital generation, do not depend on in-class learning as they used to be; however, they need a new language learning experience out-of the classroom where they can enjoy what they are doing, feel comfortable, and use what they know; their knowledge about technology. Moreover, in this concern, " … Regarding the use of social media as an English-language-learning tool, we can say that success in attaining genuine interaction, collaboration, and self-direction comes when learners take over the use of the sources, that is when they are given autonomy." (Nunan& Richards, 2015: 92). i.e. learners learn when they experience their own studies by themselves. Therefore, it is our new role as teachers to help our learners to get involved in their learning process, responsible on their own learning so that they can experience their studies and develop their language skills being autonomous learners. Furthermore, Lee (2019: 41) in her review of Lai's book (2017) stated that she proposed a process-oriented framework to guide teachers in using effective strategies to help students develop self-regulation outside the classroom. This means that teachers need to be trained to help their students to work independently when they are online, so they can meet the learner-centeredness approach objectives. In this respect, learners' autonomy is developed by gradually allowing them more control of the process and content of their learning, hence, autonomy could be achieved through the interaction between the teacher and his learners (Little, 2007). Thus, the teacher has to motivate his learners to take part in their learning and enable them to make decisions about their own progress.

To sum up, technology has created the best opportunity for teachers to interact with their learners motivating them to be involved in their learning process since they are the first stakeholders who will develop not only their language skills but also their metacognitive skills. Hence, considering the following proverb " you can bring the horse to the river, but you cannot make him drink", learning can occur only if learners are involved taking a pivotal part in their learning process.

5-Most Significant Studies

In this concern, many studies have been conducted by many researchers in the field.

Lee (2016) University of New Hampshire : Online Task-Based Learning

Instruction

This study investigated the affordances for autonomous learning in a fully online learning environment involving the implementation of task-based instruction in conjunction with Web 2.0 technologies. To that end, four-skill-integrated tasks and digital tools were incorporated into the coursework. Data were collected using midterm reflections, post surveys and final interviews from two online elementary language courses. The results indicate that the types of tasks and digital tools utilized fostered learner autonomy in different ways. Structured tasks enabled students to work independently to create content, whereas open-ended tasks allowed them more freedom in exploring the understanding of a particular topic through social interaction. Significantly, teacher scaffolding through modeling and timely feedback affected student self-regulated efforts in online learning. The study concludes that personal commitment to the coursework and cognitive engagement with the learning material contributed to the degree of learning autonomy and the level of social interaction in fully online language learning (Lee, 2016).

The Results:

1-Student Reactions to TBI Regarding Autonomous Learning

The high rating of Statement 12 (Mean = 4.16) indicates that most students reacted very favorably to the online course. Most students agreed that using TBI was an effective way to develop their language skills and learn about the target culture.

Table 1. Students' Reactions to Online TBI Regarding Autonomous Learning

Statement of the Post-Course Survey	Mean	*SD*
1. I was able to learn on my own by using course materials organized on the class wiki.	4.09	0.74
2. I usually made plans and thought about how to best carry out task-based assignments.	3.97	0.69
3. I invested time in learning daily materials and completing online assignments in a timely fashion.	3.61	0.52
4. I was able to learn grammar lessons on my own using both teacher-made and *YouTube* videos provided by the instructor.	3.88	0.64
5. I used the instructor's feedback to made revisions on my assignments and monitor my own progress.	4.00	0.70
6. I found four-skill-integrated tasks interesting and fun that kept me motivated throughout the course.	4.12	0.67
7. Using task-based activities allowed me to interact and collaborate with my peers in a meaningful manner.	4.07	0.64
8. I felt comfortable using digital tools to carry out online activities.	4.32	0.65
9. I found *Blackboard Collaborative* useful to practice Spanish skills with my instructor and peers.	4.26	0.44
10. I enjoyed using blog and *VoiceThread* to share and exchange ideas with my peers.	4.17	0.73
11. Reading and listening to my peers' work allowed me to reflect further about the chosen topics.	3.13	0.66
12. Overall, I had a positive experience with the online course.	4.16	0.57

Lee (2016:87).

These comments confirm the importance of increasing learner self-regulation and the readiness for autonomy toward L2 learning. To become autonomous, students need to develop management skills, such as deciding what, when, and how to learn and knowing how to monitor their own learning.

2-Effectiveness of Tasks Types and Digital Tools on Learner Autonomy

Overall, students had a positive experience with the types of tasks and digital tools used for the online course. Some students reported that CMC(Computer Mediated Communications) tasks kept them motivated throughout the semester(Statement 6) and engaged them in collaboration; working together with

their classmates (Statement 7). A number of students observed that TBI provided them with ideal conditions to make use of the four language skills. For example, One student expressed her approval of using four-skill-
"I really liked how most assignments focused on specific skills. I particularly enjoyed making one-minute oral recordings using real-life topics and listening prompts provided by the instructor. Making audio recordings enabled me to practice my pronunciation and speaking, which were my weakest areas. I also liked how topics were related to the vocabulary and grammatical structures that we learned from each chapter" (Cited in Lee, 2016: 89).

Table 2. Students' Views of Different Types of Tasks

	Very interesting	Interesting	Somewhat interesting	Not interesting
Blog writing (Teacher/student-selected)	47.4%	47.4%	5.2%	0%
Oral recordings (Teacher-assigned)	71.1%	28.9%	0%	0%
VoiceThread interactive activities (Teacher-assigned)	68.4%	21.2%	5.2%	5.2%
Video conferencing (Teacher/student-selected)	47.4%	42.2%	10.4%	0%
Cultural presentations (Student-selected)	57.9%	26.3%	15.8%	0%

Lee (2016: 89).

With respect to digital tools, the results showed that students not only felt comfortable using digital tools(Statement 8), but also enjoyed using them such as Blackboard Collaborate (Statement 9). According to the midterm reflections, most students (n = 22) found real-time interaction extremely beneficial for improving their interpersonal skills. For example, one student wrote the following:

"The most useful tool was the Blackboard Collaborate because I was able to ask and understand my questions in real-time meetings as if I were asking the teacher in class. I also enjoyed interacting with my classmates during the role-play activities. It was really fun."

Table 3. Students' Views of Usefulness of Digital Tools for Online Learning

	Essential to Me	Very Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not Very Useful	Not Useful
Blogger: Personal entries	68.4%	31.6%	0%	0%	0%
Audioboo: Oral recordings	74.4%	20.1%	5.5%	0%	0%
VoiceThread: Interactive comments	37.5%	42.1%	20.5%	0%	0%
Blackboard Collaborate: Oral activities	42.1%	57.9%	0%	0%	0%
VoiceThread: Cultural projects	52.6%	36.9%	10.5%	0%	0%

Lee (2016: 90).

More than 80% of the students enjoyed using CMC tools for both individual and collaborative tasks(Statement 10). The following example concerning the Holy Week in Spain demonstrates how students collaboratively shared and exchanged comments in VoiceThread:
Student A: Uno de los platostradicionles *quepreparandurante la Semana Santa esbacalao.
(One of the traditional dishes * they prepare during the Holy Week is codfish.)
Student B: No *supe *esto. Me gusta el pescado y parece delicioso. ¿Tegusta el pescado?
(I *did not know *that. I like fish and it looks delicious. Do you like fish?) [* = error or missing word]

3-Teacher Scaffolding and Feedback for Self-Regulated Learning

Comments gathered from the final interviews revealed that most students appreciated the affective support received from the instructor. For example, one student said that the instructor always used very positive comments to provide feedback, such as "excellent" or "good job" to offer encouragement. The study evidently shows that teacher's guidance and support mediated through technology was an important factor. as reported by Lee (2016: 92) a student observed and stated that:
"I received a lot of help from the teacher via email. The responses were always

very fast. Also the teacher was willing to meet online to go over the materials I did not understand. Being able to interact with the teacher regularly really kept me focused on the course work. I wouldn't be able to complete this course without the instructor's guidance."

She (ibid, 93) added that another student described the teacher's guidance as follows:

"I found the teacher's modeling very beneficial. I usually listened to the teacher-made recordingsa few times before I recorded my own. I also found her step-to-step instructions very helpful tocarry out each assignment. By the second week, I became more confident in speaking activities and relied less on teachers' models."

More importantly, teacher scaffolding through constant monitoring of student progress created room for learner autonomy. (Lee, 2010).

Statements of the Survey on the Post-Course Survey	Mean	*SD*
13. The instructor encouraged me to take an active role in my own learning.	4.25	0.62
14. The instructor provided me with sufficient guidance and support throughout the course.	4.11	0.41
15. I developed a deeper understanding of learning materials through teacher modeling.	4.03	0.52
16. The instructor's explanations were clear to help me understand my mistakes and make error corrections.	4.27	0.55
17. The instructor's feedback helped me improve my writing and speaking skills.	4.08	0.73

Table 4. Students' Reactions to Teacher Scaffolding and Feedback

Lee (2016: 92).

6-Benefits and Usefulness of Digital Technology in University Teaching

Henderson, Selwyn, and Aston (2015) at Monash University, Australia, conducted a study about student perceptions of 'useful' digital technology in university teaching

Table 2. Cited reasons for digital technology being particularly useful in relation to students' university studies.

Practice	Description	Digital devices/practices most cited in relation to this factor	Per cent citing
Organizing and managing the logistics of studying	Managing schedules, timetables, fulfilling deadlines and course requirements, 'keeping in the loop' with regards to university news and course information	Learning management system as repository of resources and information	46.9
Flexibility of place and location	Flexibility of location, ability to engage 'remotely' with academic work off-campus, engaging at a distance and not having to be 'present', being able to be mobile, portability of university work	Library databases and library websites; laptop computers	32.7
Time-saving	Saving student time, quicker processes, more immediate outcomes, convenient scheduling of activities	Writing notes/ word-processing; library databases and library websites; online assignment submission	30.6
Reviewing, replaying and revising	Catching up on missed material, repeating viewing of materials to improve understanding	Lecture recordings (audio/ video) of university lectures	27.9
Researching information	Researching information for assignments; quantity and quality of information access	Library databases and library websites	27.9
Supporting basic tasks	'Easier' writing of assignments; 'easier' and 'helpful' information management and retrieval of resources	Writing notes/ word-processing; general internet search engines (e.g. Google)	26.4
Communicating and collaborating	Asking questions and exchanging information; working with other students; sharing ideas; preparing group work	Facebook and other social networks; Google docs, wikis, collaborative documents	16.8
Augmenting university learning materials	Watching lectures, tutorials and talks from outside university; cross-checking and comparing with other sources; 'going elsewhere'	Watching videos from sources outside university; Wikipedia	14.6
Seeing information in different ways	Visualizing concepts through video, animation or annotations; allowing real-time lecturer demonstrations and 'board work' in lectures	Watching videos from sources outside university	11.7
Cost saving	Saving money and expenditure	E-readers, online journals and books	4.4

and learning which identifies distinct digital benefits.

Table.5 Identifies distinct digital benefits:

Henderson et al. (2015: 5).

Conclusion

To conclude, autonomy cannot be achieved unless learners' are aware of their responsibility toward their own learning. Therefore, as learners must be motivated and take part in their own learning, the emergence of technology and its development becomes an opportunity to promote learner autonomy not only in the classroom but also beyond the classroom because learners, who are the digital generation, need a new language learning experience out-of the classroom where they use what they know, feel comfortable, and can enjoy what they are doing. Moreover, technology helps learners to develop their language and metacognitive skills towards proficiency as a goal, and it is a key factor that contributes to guarantee a high quality of teaching and learning.

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