Applying E-Learning into College English Courses

Kuei-fen Tai
Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Chung Hua University

Abstract

In today’s society, computers are omnipresent in college students’ lives. Many, if not most, of them are more proficient in technology and Internet than in English. Realizing the facts, the author has come up with the idea of combining computer technology and English teaching/learning, hoping to enhance students’ concentration on English learning. Attempts of the combination include (1) using the popular instant messaging tool, MSN messenger, which students are using on daily basis, to chat in English with students and (2) creating several e-learning courses based on E-campus, the all-campus e-learning platform of Chung Hua University. During the processes of applying computer technology into English teaching, the author has realized its magnificent educational power and students’ reflections also show this is a right track to go on. This paper first introduces the application procedures of the author’s computer-assisted English teaching and then categorizes some advantages and disadvantages of this innovative teaching method. The analyses can be referred to by EFL teachers who hope to add something innovative in their teaching to encourage English learners’ learning interests and then enhance their English language abilities.

Keywords: alternative teaching method, Internet-based language teaching, e-learning courses.

Received : Oct 31, 2005 ; In revised form : Jan 13, 2006
Introduction

Unlike their teachers, college students of this generation grow up with computers and the Internet. As Jones (2002) and his fellow researchers discovered, “college students are early adopters and heavy users of the Internet”. The author’s own experiences and contacts with students also show that the time spent by Taiwanese college students being online is escalating over the years. In order to catch up with the enhancement of technology and to offer students opportunities to try something when learning, many schools in Taiwan have set up E-classrooms and e-learning platforms for students and teachers. In addition, a number of ESL/EFL instructors have also applied computers and networking to their teaching. In 2002, a campus-wide e-learning platform, E-campus, was launched to all students and teachers in Chung Hua University. E-classrooms equipped with electronic facilities, including LCD projectors, screens and/or notebook computers have also been established. These services have not only provided teachers and students new alternatives in teaching/learning activities, but also pushed teachers who were afraid of technology to involve themselves into teaching with computer technology.

The author presumed that e-learning activities may be a good learning option for students because using a modern and up-to-the-minute tool to teach English language can amplify students’ motivation. Therefore, the author has constructed several courses based on E-campus. For these courses, lecture materials, homework and discussion board are posted online, so that students can download lecture materials before or after the classes for self preview and review. At times, exercises will be assigned and students have to upload their files to e-campus to the teacher. Additionally, the author considered that since Internet and online chatting have played an inescapable role in students’ lives, the incorporation of them and teaching, that is, to chat on line in English with them should become a fitting way to advance students’ learning interests and hence the learning efficacy. MSN Messenger was chosen to be the chatting tool since it is the more accepted one among the author’s students. The author conducted chatting sessions for the students and then analyzed errors produced by subject students and categorized some features of English used in chat sessions. The results demonstrated the communicative and pedagogical power of MSN Messenger®. Students’ reflections showed that they are willing to accept this new way of learning as long as some technical problems are solved ahead of time.
Literature Review

Hanson-Smith stated in 2000 that “In the technology-enhanced environment, the classroom has expanded to encompass the world”. Egbert & Hanson-Smith also elaborated in 1999 that “… they (computers), in fact, present an environment in which learning takes place.” Snell’s research in 1999 has indicated that the enhancement of technology presents a new choice for language teachers and learners. Computers and the Internet have undoubtedly changed the ideas of language educators and learners all over the world in teaching. To elaborate the tendency, Grey classified four educational functions of the Internet in 1999: (1) Search for and receive (2) Publish and provide (3) Talk to and reply and (4) Collaborate and learn.

Following Dornyei (2001)’s statement that “teacher skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness”, the author believes that incorporating “cool” tools to student’s English learning process can stimulate their language learning. Furthermore, computers, together with the Internet, allow language learners more freedom to work at their own pace and level. They are also more likely to receive quicker, if not immediate feedback, so learners have more opportunities for autonomous learning. In a word, E-learning courses should be able to boost students’ learning interests and hence the learning efficacy.
Findings

After experiments with online chatting and teaching E-learning courses on E-campus platform with students in Chung Hua University, some pedagogical findings have been discovered and they are stated below:

1. Achieving Communicative Competence through Online Chatting

Hymes introduced the concept of “communicative competence” in 1971; numerous discussion and redefinitions have been followed afterwards. In these researches, eight aspects of communicative competence are generally described. Online chatting is proved to be a good helper to achieve all of them. These eight aspects of communicative competence and online chatting’s match to them is represented in table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eight Communicative Competence Aspects</th>
<th>Online Chatting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic Aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Phonology and orthography</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Grammar</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Vocabulary</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Discourse (textual)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Functions</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Variations</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Interactional skills</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Cultural framework</td>
<td>YES when chatting with people from other cultures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To better recognize language learners’ use of the target language during the learning process, instructors need to find out/figure out how students use both their native language(s) and English to understand their learning strategies. Researches in the acquisition of communicative competence can help teachers understand more about students’ learning efficacy. From the chat logs collected during the author’s chatting sessions and other online communications with students, online chatting has been confirmed to be helpful for achieving all these eight aspects.

2. Constructing English E-Learning Courses on E-Campus

According to Chickering and Gamson (1987), good undergraduate education should meet the following seven principles: Encourages contact between students and faculty, Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students, Encourages active learning, Gives prompt feedback, Emphasizes time on task and Communicates high
expectations, and Respects diverse talents and ways of learning. The author discovered that e-learning courses on E-campus can match most of the seven principles. These seven principles and e-learning’s match to them is depicted in table 2:

Table 2. Matching E-learning on e-campus to Seven Principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>E-learning on e-campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Encourages contact between students and faculty</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Encourages active learning</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Gives prompt feedback</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Emphasizes time on task</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Communicates high expectations</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Features of English Used Online

Some differences between English used online and in real life have been noticed and the main features revealed are: (1) instant language repair, (2) uses of emoticons and animated graphics, (3) questions about English and teacher's immediate feedback and (4) closer teacher-student relationship. In the following, each feature is illustrated by example(s).

3.1 Instant Language repair

The examples below showed that students were more alert to the language used in the chat room than they did in real-life oral conversations. They realized their own errors and would correct them more often.

Examples:

★。君。☆《 HOWARD 》☆。豪。★ 說: ^^-that OK
★。君。☆《 HOWARD 》☆。豪。★ 說: that's OK

liang691206@hotmail.com 說: p k

liang691206@hotmail.com 說: o k

The students realized their own errors and made an correction in the very next line.
3.2 Uses of Emoticons and Animated Graphics

Without help from facial expressions, Internet users use a system of emoticons to express their emotions and feelings to more accurately convey information they would like to.

Examples

★。君。☆《HOWARD》☆。豪。★ 說: *-

ttyying@hotmail.com 說: Teacher that’s ok ^^.

Other emotions including :p, ^o), :S and so on were used.
The Version 7 of MSN Messenger enables users to use animated graphics to further express themselves. A message like the following will show up when an animated graphics is sent:

yogin1227@hotmail.com 傳送「黃色笑臉」動畫快遞

3.3 Questions about English and Teacher’s Immediate Feedback and ahead-of-time explanation

Feedback plays an important role in language learning. Without teachers’ feedback on errors, students’ improvement is harder to achieve. Online chatting provides an excellent access for teachers to make immediate feedback on students’ errors. When necessary, teachers can explain/translate a certain word or a phrase which they suppose students do not know in advance.

Example:

English Class 說: Liang: in what case do you like to go travelling?

liang691206@hotmail.com 說: case??

English Class 說: in what case==> 在什麼情況下

3.3 Closer Teacher-Student Relationship

Students were found to be more stress-free to talk to the teacher online than in
real life. They would ask the teacher personal information, which they might not do so in face-to-face talks. The gap between the teacher and students has been to some extents bridged, which, according to the author’s teaching experiences, can be great encouragement for students.

Benefits and Limitations

1. Benefits

After semesters of e-learning procedures, students have unveiled the following advantages they found during the learning processes:

1.1 Use of multimedia elements

The E-campus platform and online chatting have facilitated the communication and use of multimedia elements, such as sound, video, and interactive hypermedia. Some traditionally boring courses were turned to be more appealing.

1.2 Flexibility and convenience

E-learning based on the Internet can reduce some traditional inconvenience of learning environments, such as space and time. Through E-learning, students can determine their own studying schedule and adjust their own studying paces.

1.3 Expression of opinions

A common scene in a Taiwanese college classroom is that the teacher asks a question but few, if not no, students “dare” to answer it. Asking questions or expressing their own ideas in front of other people are even rarer scenes. The online discussion board has served to be a good alternative to achieve the mutual communication between teachers and students and between students and their fellow classmates.

2. Limitations and Suggested Solutions

Besides advantages, students also complained about the following disadvantages of E-learning, solutions of which are suggested as well in the following:

2.1 Drawback of the Internet Uses in General

Various kinds of viruses and other harmful programs are spreading all over the Internet. The more often learners are online, the more possibly their computers get infected with those harmful codes. In order to reduce threats to the minimum, anti-virus software should be installed beforehand and students should be taught not to accept files transferred from unknown sources.

2.1 Technical Support

Stable and working network is the basis of successful E-learning. Technical support for this should be conveniently available. In addition, students differ in their computer literacy. Some of them may feel panicked when encountering computer-related problems, which diminished gradually students’ interests and
motivation to use the system. Ideally, classes of how to tackle simple problems of computers and network should be given in advance.

2.2 Time-Consuming

Researches have shown that excessive uses of the Internet may also bring about various disadvantages, such as network addiction. For this reason, while applying technology into English teaching, teachers should inform and educate students to cut the time spent online. On the other hand, it takes a lot of teachers’ time, effort and passion to conduct e-learning courses. Teachers’ unfailing enthusiasm is needed to make the whole teaching process work out.

Conclusion

With the progression of computer technology, combination of computer technology and language teaching has become a track language teachers have to go on when hoping to boost students’ learning interests and efficacy.

After conducting online chatting sessions and teaching with E-learning courses on E-campus, most of the author’s students favor learning in a “fashionable” and intercommunicative way. Teaching processes has inspired the author to know the remarkable teaching/learning potentials that computer technology possesses. At the same time, students’ learning progress is better realized.

Though the procedures of constructing and developing e-learning courses in the trial semesters are just preliminary, they have yielded some inspiring results. It is hoped that a new way of educational thinking and implementing can be offered for all ESL/EFL teachers. Further studies will be done in the near future for more stimulating results.

References


Kuei-fen Tai. Applying E-Learning into College English Courses


