

The Enhancement of Learners' Autonomy and Collaboration Competency in Online English Courses

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Abstract: In the digital era, the traditional offline and input-oriented teaching model can no longer meet the demands of contemporary English education. Innovation and transformation of the teaching paradigm are thus imperative. The integration of technology into education has transformed traditional teaching methods, making online English courses increasingly prevalent. This paper explores the enhancement of learner autonomy and collaboration competency in online English courses through the application of three techniques: blogs, wikis, and virtual worlds, discussing how blogs can foster reflective writing and peer feedback, wikis can support collaborative learning, and virtual worlds like Second Life can provide immersive experiential learning. It also emphasizes the shift in teacher and student roles, where teachers act as managers and facilitators, and learners take greater responsibility for their learning, which represents a new horizon in the digitalization of education, signifying that the philosophy of English education and teaching methods would soon reach a new level.

1. Introduction

The development of technological innovation and information technology is continuously reshaping the forms of education. The ways of acquiring and imparting knowledge, as well as the relationship between teaching and learning, are undergoing huge changes. Online courses have been an inevitable trend in the development of teaching in which the deep integration of modern technology and teaching has created conditions for the improvement of teaching quality. In light of these developments, university English instructors should align with the trends of the times and integrate course content with information technology within the English teaching process. It has been identified that computer-assisted instruction in teaching would promote collaborative learning and enhance the capacity of autonomy^[1]. Only in this way can a transformation from traditional English teaching to information-based English teaching be realized.

2. Change of the Role of Teachers and Students in the Online Course

Compared with traditional EFL classroom where they are in a dominated position, teachers in this online environment are expected to assume new roles, which are managers and facilitators^[2]. Different from traditional face-to-face class, the role of the teacher during the online course is

limited. As for manager, it is teachers' responsibility to manage and plan the whole course and recourse. As for facilitator, being sensitive to learners' learning process, instructors monitor and provide guidance, rather than spoon feed in the online teaching environment. It aligns with the aim of the course, which is to create a learner-centered atmosphere where learners' competency of autonomy and collaborative learning would be enhanced.

With the special feature of the physical and social separation from the teachers, autonomy dominates a vital position in distance education^[3]. Learner autonomy, as defined by Holec, requires that learner should take responsibility of all aspects of the learning process including setting objectives, selecting resources, and evaluating what they have learned^[4]. In the online environment, it is difficult for learners to effectively take advantage of their teacher as a knowledge resource because the response time from the instructor are easily procrastinated. Thus, compared with traditional classroom, learners need to have a higher level of learner autonomy to achieve successful learning in this online environment. In online courses, two of the aspects of autonomy would be centered on, namely planning and monitoring. As for planning, online courses should provide the learners as much flexibility as possible, which means there is no exact compulsory time for every week's lesson, so that study can fit alongside learners' own schedule, pacing their own study. Although the flexibility is ensured, learners are still required to complete the task at the scheduled time. Especially in the asynchronous online learning process, the learners need to equip with the ability to plan their own pace. In terms of monitoring, the responsibilities are left to the learner themselves to a large extent. Compared with the traditional classroom where teachers could provide scaffolding immediately and directly, in the online course learners themselves are highly involved in the process of monitoring, seeking for assistance by their own.

When thrive in the online environment, there are many challenges that learners have not faced in the traditional learning environment. To obtain more successful achievements, learners need to take control of their own learning pace and be aware of and justify the validity and reliability of the resources they assess. Thus, through online course, learners are expected to be led towards greater autonomy.

3. Three Techniques Used in the Course and how them apply in the Activity

Being a multimedia course, three techniques could be applied in the online courses, which are blog, wiki and Second Life. Blog, a social writing platform, offers a more collaborative way to write through web. In the course, learners will be required to write reflective journals after each lesson via this platform, expressing their ideas freely and exchanging comments with other classmates to facilitate reflection. As for wiki, it has been considered as a valuable system for saving and editing information, highly used in as a tool for collaborative learning. During the learning process, it provides the learners a base to share all the useful information with the whole class. In terms of Second Life, it is an online virtual world where offers an experiential learning environment, organizing discussions, group presentations and tutorials in this course.

3.1 Blog and Reflective Writing

As a pedagogical tool in language education, blogs have created a both individually expressive and simultaneously collaborative space for learners during the learning process. To be more specific, first, blogs provide each learner a chance to individually rethink and reflect on what they have learned in class. During online teaching, blogs would be used as a medium for learners to reflect on their learning, developing their strategy of autonomy. Learners would write reflective journals after each lesson, being as a part of learners independent learning strategy. Additionally, creating a collaborative learning platform, blogs offer the learners an alternative way of receiving feedback

and exchanging ideas with peers and even potentially the public at large^[5]. In that way, blogging would not only facilitate learners' critical thinking skills by giving comments to others work. Also, compared with the judgmental feedback, the constructive and informative feedback from peers would foster learners' learning autonomy, being able to make students reflect more deeply on their further study. In this regard, following the task and command provided by the teacher, blog can be a valuable platform for learners to reflect on their language learning and facilitate their critical thinking skills, leading to the development of autonomy.

3.2 Wiki and Collaborative Learning

Compared with blogs where only one learner shares the writing and read and commented by others, a wiki is a platform that allows content to be freely modified by any users, which means wikis are always used to be open to collaboration. Being one of the most widespread and effective collaborative networking tools where users could edit and work on it, wikis provide a venue in which resources could be collectively produced, organized and sustained for language learning^[6].

Based on the nature of wiki, learners are expected to work collaboratively, sharing the information and knowledge with each other, which could lead to the success of achieving educational objectives and higher quality of learning. For example, wikis could provide the opportunity to interact with an evolving task during the whole process of the course. At the beginning of every lesson, learners could be encouraged to complete a shared mind map together via wiki, adding information related to what they will learn in this lesson. The mind map serves to activate learners' schematic knowledge into topics, emerging as a valuable aid in their following learning process. Besides, after all the lessons, a detailed network of knowledge about what they have learnt during the course would be completed with all students' collaborative effort. This final product represents the aggregated output which cannot be separated to individual input. As for instructor, witnessing the evolution of the task, they just need to carefully observe and analyze learners' learning progress, instead of participating in the activity or influencing the learners' natural development during the learning process.

However, some learners may think that this kind of collaboration work intervenes their independently individual thinking, because any user can change and edit what others have written. Indeed, the collective work requires trust of others' productive contribution, lack of which would emerge the tension. Thus, collaborative learning through wiki requires teachers' valid organization and mediation.

3.3 Virtual World: Second Life and Experiential Learning

Different from the two techniques mentioned above which are text-based online learning platform, being more natural, vivid and immersive, second life provides a three-dimensional virtual reality environment, which is a big shift. Being immersed in such an environment, it can better enhance the learning experience.

With diverse and useful affordances, it is believed that virtual worlds could be considered as an effective learning tool to better engage learners in the online language learning process and achieve higher levels of educational outcomes. In this learning environment, learners could experience the activity such as experimentation, exploration and dynamic feedback^[7]. Some pedagogical activities used in the real-life classrooms could be replicated in second life. In the course, students will be asked to complete several tasks through second life as what they usually do in real life environment. For instance, learners should upload their PowerPoint slide and give presentation to the whole class using the communication tools in second life. When learners playing everyday social roles, the distinction between the virtual world and real world would be mitigated. Thus, second life offers

learners an effective experiential learning environment where the act of the avatar better engages the learners beyond computer-mediated communication.

In addition, compared with traditional text-based online learning environment, more effective and synchronous communication would happen in the online learning environments. In second life, applying the traditional communication cues of real-life interactions, such as gestures and voice, virtual worlds provide an authentic learning environment for learners, engaging them in a more meaningful learning. Additionally, second life solves the obstacle of learner isolation, providing learners the opportunity for authentic communication with native speakers of a target language. Thus, in the online course, besides the compulsory task, namely giving presentations and tutorials, students will also be encouraged to explore other functions, like communicating with other avatars in second life. For example, there may be a situation where the learner is asked to help other avatars navigate the direction. It is the time when the real communication happens. In that way, this open virtual world provides a kind of experiential learning combined with real language practice.

However, there are still some risks that should not be ignored when using this kind of virtual world in the educational context. According to Farley, usually this kind of virtual technologies are initially designed for entertainment instead of education purpose^[8]. Therefore, without well-designed tasks and adequate guidance provided by instructors, although learners are well immersed and engaged in the virtual worlds, it still may be difficult to provide authentically educative function for the users.

4. Conclusion

The development of “Internet + education” has gradually made the online teaching model an important direction for the development of education in the future, during which there is an increasing need for learner autonomy due to the physical and social separation from teachers. The three techniques—blogs, wikis, and virtual worlds—used in online courses would enhance learner autonomy and collaboration competency. These techniques, providing flexible learning opportunities, collaborative platforms, and immersive learning experiences respectively, can be effectively applied in online English courses to achieve educational goals. With careful organization and guidance from instructors, the successful implementation of these online teaching techniques would ensure educational effectiveness and this kind of innovation and transformation in teaching are imperative to meet the evolving needs of learners in the digital age.

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