The Effect of the Online Learning Environment in Promoting English Language Skills for ESL Students

Haya Turjman

Saudi Arabia, Jeddah

Abstract: **This paper presents the positive effect of the online learning environment in promoting the English language skills for students who study English as a Second Language (ESL). Recently, many research studies have inquired into how engaging diverse (ESL) students in an online learning setting can advance their English language skills in all academic language areas (writing, reading, and speaking). Moreover, how the collaborative learning environment via the internet can reduce the "affective factors" and contribute effectively in developing students' personal and social behaviors, by engaging them in a social, flexible, and independent learning environment. The online learning environment can reinforce students' writing skills and motivate them to provide high-quality work, through some strategies such as peers' feedback and peer observation. This paper demonstrates that engaging ESL students in the online collaborative learning environment cannot only develop academic English language proficiency but also it produces a responsible, independent learner who has high cognitive skills.**

Keywords: **online learning, English language, promote student's skills, ELS.**

1. BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

In today's global society, English has become the universal language for communication in various fields such as, in the economic transactions, social communication, and academic education. As a result of that, the number of individuals who are interested in learning English has increased. In the reality, students who learn English as a new language find difficulty expressing their thoughts, interacting with others, and practicing English in the traditional classroom. Therefore, it is important to use alternative strategies of teaching English and shift the attention from a teacher-centered teaching style and replace it with a student-centered learning atmosphere. That can happen by using the technological instruments such as computers and the internet. Computers and the Internet are useful tools for doing various activities with ease. Also, it makes learners more responsible and gives them the opportunity to practice language easily and to work on improving their academic language skills effectively. Regarding to learn English as a second language, there are two significant theories that are invented by Krashen "the learning-acquisition" or "comprehension hypothesis" in the year (1985) and "affective filter "in (1987). The "comprehension theory" predicted that English Learners can acquire the new language effectively when they receive comprehensible inputs and when they understand the instructions that they receive. The other theory by Krashen is the "affective filter" that predicted that learning English can be influenced by many various factors such as, anxiety, self-confidence, motivation. Thus, increasing the "affective filter" can hinder language acquisition (as cited in Latifi, Ketabi, & Mohammadi, 2013, p.223, 224). This paper assumes that the online learning can improve the academic language for ESL students and reduce the" affective filter" that may occur in the traditional learning setting. The online learning can give students more control in their learning. As a result, students will become more responsible and self-motivated for learning. Thus, engaging ESL students in online collaborative learning environment via the internet can assist them to effectively learn academic English language and reinforce their personal and social skills.

2. THE ONLINE LEARNING AND THE IMPROVEMENT IN THE ACADEMIC ENGLISH SKILLS

The Role of Peer Feedback in Enhancing the Writing Skills for ESL Students:

Without any doubt, the effect of the peer feedback has proven its capability to enhance and develop students' writing skills. Researchers have reached the conclusion that students can benefit from the positive impact of peer feedback, whether in the traditional learning setting or through the online learning environment. In fact, many studies have investigated the effects of the peer feedback, especially with the students who study English as a Second Language (ESL). According to the Malaysian study by (Maarof, Yamat, & Li, 2011) that conducted a survey to inquire into the perspective of ESL students toward the peer feedback effects. The survey results demonstrate that the majority of students have a positive view of feedback, whether from a teacher or peer, and they believe feedback from different people (teachers and peers) can be helpful in promoting their writing skills. Researchers stated that "Good ESL writing needs drafting, revision, making changes and corrections and peers can actually provide effective feedback at various levels in the writing process." (Maarof et al., 2011, p. 30).

The Peer Observation Through the Online Collaborative Writing Environment:

Many educational professionals use a Wiki, which is an online collaborative platform, in order to let their students, participate in collaborative writing. A study of collaborative writing was conducted in China with Chinese participants who study English as a second language. The finding of (Woo, Chu, & Li, 2013) study demonstrated that the peer feedback can influence students' writing. Also, increasing the number of peer comments on the Wiki can raise the revision process and the quality of students' writing (Woo et al., 2013, p. 302). Thus, when students are observing different writing styles, it probably will inform them about their writing level and will help them to make self-evaluation. That would motivate them to increase their writing quality by extending the length of their writing, using advanced vocabulary, and using different writing structures. The nature of engaging students in virtual learning environments would make students care a lot about their writing quality. Wu (2006) supported this idea and pointed out that, students tend to provide a high quality of writing in an online learning setting because they know that other students will read their responses (Wu, 2006, p. 136).

The Role of Epistemic and Suggestive Feedback Strategies in Improving Students Writing:

Although some students do not give informative critical feedback, most pupils in the online learning provide feedback that can play a significant role in motivating students to improve their future writing drafts. Guasch, Espasa, Alvarez, and Kirschnerb (2013) addressed the impact of various types of feedback that were provided by teachers and peers in enhancing student's collaborative writing skills in an asynchronous online environment. In general, the results of this study demonstrated that feedback has positively affected students' writing skills through the online collaborative work. Epistemic and suggestive feedback strategies are effective in improving students writing. Epistemic feedback can encourage a student to think critically, to pay attention to related issues and to make a connection between concepts. All these conceptual processes can effectively enhance ESL students' writing skills through the online collaborative learning environments. Another type of effective feedback is the suggestion feedback. According to Guasch et al. (2013), students would revise and promote their writing as a second draft when they receive suggestions from their online classmates. The suggestive feedback can be something such as, *you should consider this point*, or *you should show the relation* (Guasch et al., 2013, p.333). One important part of peer feedback is that it gives students the chance to modify their work. (Yu and Wu (2013) stated that " The fact that someone other than teachers will view their work tends to induce students to take charge of and invest more in the preparation of their initial work and the subsequent revision of the work " (Yu & Wu, 2013, p.333). In addition, students may provide more efficient feedback because they can simplify the ideas to each other, due to the fact ESL students may have similar language skill level.

The Nature of Virtual Learning Environment Positively Contributes to Students Reading:

Word-based communication through the virtual learning setting can reinforce students reading and writing skills. In this setting, students are required to read and to write more than in the traditional learning setting because reading and writing are important ways to support and to evaluate students learning in this setting. Some of the reading strategies, such as summarizing, underlining, and highlighting, are effective for enhancing ESL students' comprehension skills. The Chen, Wang & Chen (2014) study addresses the role of the digital reading annotation system (DRAS) (selection of words,

underlining, highlighting, etc...) in promoting English reading, especially for ESL students. The finding of this study demonstrated a significant improvement in English reading for the participants who applied the (DRAS) (Chen et al., 2014, p.112). Thus, these strategies can effectively work in the online environment. In addition, in the virtual learning setting, students may need to produce written products, then read and write a reflection for other classmates. Experiencing all these activities can enhance and develop ESL students' reading and writing skills. Besides that, engaging students into collaborative learning environments can increase their vocabulary knowledge. Students will encounter new English vocabulary that they may have never seen, or they may learn new ways of using some familiar words.

Promoting the High Order Thinking and Critical Thinking Skills:

Another advantage that can gain from learning through the virtual environment is engaging students in high order thinking activity. According to (McLoughlin and Maynard, 2009) 'high-order thinking' is the development or existence of skills such as application, comprehension, synthesis, evaluation, and analysis (McLoughlin & Maynard, 2009, p.148). In an online environment, students or learners engage more with each other as opposed to interaction with teachers. This fact gives students a space to be involved in high intellectual activities by reading, analyzing, evaluating, and producing creative work. Another notable effect of the online learning environment in promoting the English Language for ESL student is the ability to elicit critical thinking. The mode in which online learning is structured enhances critical thinking among learners. According to (Schindler and Burkholder, 2014) online learning can be in the form of structured prompts, and this is crucial in promoting cognitive achievement-an important component of critical thinking. Structured prompts will have detailed instructions that can elicit a definite response from a learner such as the application of knowledge to the given scenario (Schindler & Burkholder, 2014, p. 15). Thus, having specific structures to respond in the online learning setting can help students to apply the critical thinking skills, such as, how to provide effective feedback or how to respond using a specific rubric, etc. Another important component in online learning is that it promotes critical thinking among students is scaffolding. According to (Schindler and Burkholder, 2014) scaffolding is a form of help or support like (Examples, requirement or clarification) given to students so that they can complete their tasks that they would otherwise be unable to in the absence of an instructor. In an online learning environment, expectations are provided clearly and in detail. Learners thus concentrate on learning as opposed to wondering what to do, and this promotes critical thinking (Schindler & Burkholder, 2014, p. 16).

3. THE ONLINE LEARNING AND THE "AFFECTIVE FACTORS"

Practicing English and Participating in a Friendly Environment:

The online learning environment can reflect positively on students' ability to give informative feedback. Therefore, engaging students into collaborative learning environments via the Internet can help students to be more confident and active. If they would otherwise be shy and passive in the traditional learning setting. In the traditional setting (face-to-face), many ESL students avoid to experience and practice their English language because they are afraid of making mistakes. Wu, Yen and Marek (2011) used this quote from Shamsudin, & Nesi, 2006 study "Students often decline to use English because they are embarrassed" (as cited in Wu et al., 2011, p.120). Conversely, the nature of the virtual learning can assist students to express their ideas and share their opinions in a friendly environment. Wu et al. (2011) stated that students who study English as a foreign language reported that they become more confident in using their English language through the experience of computer-mediated communication. (Wu et al., 2011, p.120). In fact, the students feel more confident to express and share their ideas in the virtual learning environment especially students who are considered to be shy. In addition, in the asynchronous learning environment, students feel less anxiety because they are not stressed to give immediate responses. Thus, that would give students the opportunity to think and provide thoughtful responses. Observing other works can give students ideas and inform them about their level of understanding of the class topic that can raise their level of confidence. These advantages that are gained from the online learning environment can help all regular students, as well as ESL students.

The Virtual Learning Creates an Independent Responsible Learner:

Online learners have more control over the learning process, unlike in the face-to-face classroom where learners are the only recipient of information, the online learning environment can be more helpful for ESL students learning because its structure that focuses on students, not on the teachers. It gives students more opportunities to participate and to contribute to the learning operation. McLoughlin and Mynard (2009) reported a study by (Harasim, 1987; Winkelmans, 1988)

stated that "Some studies show that while traditional classrooms may contain up to 80% of teacher talk time, online discussions often contain instructor contributions of only 10 to 15% "(as cited in McLoughlin & Mynard, 2009, p.148). Thus, the role of the teacher in the virtual learning environment appears as an adviser more than instructor like in the traditional setting. In fact, this will make students responsible learners and self-motivated for learning. As the result of the actual absence of a teacher, students in the virtual learning are self-learners, because they receive few instructions. In fact, this can be an advantage for students who learn the new language because it forces them to search, read, and evaluate all these by themselves. Therefore, when students give the effort to learn, they will effectively master these skills.

Various Learning Tools for Independent Learners:

Learning through the Internet exposes ESL students to numerous learning recourses, such as lectures, videos, games, and audio files. All these tasks can provide ESL students with different ways of learning. In this point, the online learning environment surpasses the traditional learning setting. The internet acts as the universal library where an infinite amount of material is found. Learners can look up for materials such as eBooks, video and audio tutorials, websites, and documents that are essential in every learning environment. A study by Khan (2015) presented that " that greater exposure to audio-visual technologies, such as films, can lead to growth in second language acquisition to a significant extent in non-native English language learning environments"(Khan, 2015, p. 50) With this collection close to them, every student can choose the materials that best suit them and those that are easy to comprehend since different people have different preferences. Video tutorials, for example, will contain a combination of written and spoken forms of the English language. Thus, students can learn how to write/read while getting assistance online. Thus, the digital materials can facilitate student learning by giving them a verity of available resources.

Practicing English and Exchanging Cultural Information:

Synchronous learning is another type of online learning that has been used recently by many English language institutions and universities. According to Martin and Parker (2014) stated that "Synchronous technologies enable instructors to interact with students in real time"(Martin & Parker, 2014, p.192). This type is effective to practice the spoken language because it serves as a traditional setting (gathering at a particular time). Most of online English language institutions offer chat rooms where the learners can practice their speaking by engaging in English discussion with peer and teachers. Thus, these rooms serve as a platform for exchanging ideas and cultures through the act of sharing. (ESL) Learners can discuss various areas of classwork while exchanging different ideas. Therefore, the online learning environment does not just develop students' high order thinking, it increases their knowledge about global topics and expands their cultural competency as they increase their mastery of English language. Martin and Parker (2014) support their study by the finding that presented in (Park and Bonk ,2007) study " the major benefits of using synchronous virtual classroom as: providing immediate feedback, encouraging the exchange of multiple perspectives, enhancing dynamic interactions among participants, strengthening social presence, and fostering the exchange of emotional supports and supplying verbal elements" (Martin & Parker, 2014, p.193) Through this important feature of being able to get an immediate feedback and participate in the live interaction, students can practice their spoken language. The online learning brings students from diverse regions and cultures together and thus increase their cultural awareness of others. This blended learning environment can expand students' global knowledge also; it enriches their learning through the opportunities of cultural exchange. Thus, interact students with each other in a collaborative online environment is the essential component for learning. (Sung, 2010) mentioned that communicative language teaching has been described as the best approach for enhancing students reading, listening and writing skills. The projects developed in the (Sung, 2010,) study aimed to enhance students communicative language competency, participants had a chance to practice, listening, writing skills, reading, and speaking. Learners in the Sung (2010) study reported that learning in an online environment enhanced retention of the learned language (Sung, 2010, p. 711). Therefore, it is with no doubt that an outstanding effect of online learning environment is that it enhances and promotes the English language skills for ESL student.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ESL students can effectively benefit from learning English through online setting whether in a synchronous or asynchronous setting. Both contribute in a different way to the students who study English as a second language. The online learning environment can promote writing skills for students through peer' feedback and peers observation, students can revise their work, learn the new style of writing and new vocabulary. These observation tasks can serve as a stimulus that encourages students to be creative and to produce high-quality work and to learn as well. Besides that, the

possibility to reinforce the reading skills in the online learning environment is massive, since students involve in much reading. Students need to read teacher instruction, peer products, and others written materials. Also, in synchronous learning environment that support practice the English spoken, ESL students practice English in the friendly environment and being active without feeling fear or embarrassed. This paper also introduced remarkable features of the online learning environment that steer the attention of pupils' capability to be self-learners and independent. In addition, the online learning environment can be helpful to teach students how to use think critically and apply the high order thinking approach. Thus, ESL students in the online learning environment not only develop high order thinking, increase their knowledge, but also get a chance to learn global topics as they master the English language. For all these reasons, I believe that the online learning can be useful instrument to teach ESL students English and should be applied in any English language institution as a part of their English program.

REFERENCES

[1] Chen, C.-M, Wang, J.-Y., & Chen, Y.-C. (2014). Facilitating English-language reading performance by a digital reading annotation system with self-regulated learning mechanisms. *Educational Technology & Society*, 17 (1), 102–114.

[2] Guasch, T., Espasa, A., Alvarez, I. M., & Kirschnerb, P. A. (2013). Effects of feedback on collaborative writing in an online learning environment. *Distance Education*, 34(3), 324–338.

[3] Khan, A. (2015). Using films in the ESL classroom to improve communication skills of non- native learners. *ELT Voices*, 5(4), 46-52.

[4] Latifi, M., Ketabi, S., & Mohammadi, E. (2013). The comprehension hypothesis today: an interview with Stephen Krashen. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching,* 10(2), 221–233.

[5] Maarof, N., Yamat, H., & Li, K. L. (2011). Role of teacher, peer and teacher-peer feedback in enhancing ESL students' writing. *Innovation and Pedagogy for Lifelong Learning*, 29-35.

[6] Martin, F., & Parker, M. A. (2014). Use of synchronous virtual classrooms: why, who, and how? *Merlot Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(2), 192-210

[7] McLoughlin, D., & Mynard, J. (2009). An analysis of higher order thinking in online discussions. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *46*(2), 147-160.

[8] Schindler, L., & Burkholder, G. (2014). Instructional design and facilitation approaches that promote critical thinking in asynchronous online discussions: a review of the literature. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, *4*(4), 11-29

[9] Sung, K.-Y. (2010). Promoting communicative language learning through communicative tasks. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *1*(5), 704-713.

[10] Woo, M. M., Chu, S. K. W., & Li, X. (2013). Peer-feedback and revision process in a wiki mediated collaborative writing. *Education Tech Research,* 61,279–309.

[11] Wu, W.-C. V., Yen, L. L., & Marek, M. (2011). Using online EFL interaction to increase confidence, motivation, and ability. *Educational Technology & Society*, 14 (3), 118–129.

[12] Wu, W. - S. (2006).The effect of blog peer review and teacher feedback on the revisions of EFL writers. *Journal of Education and Foreign Languages and Literature*, 3, 125-139.

[13] Yu, F.-Y., & Wu, C.-P. (2013). Predictive effects of online peer feedback types on performance quality. *Educational Technology & Society*, 16 (1), 332–341.