

EFL Acquisition in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era: Forward Looking

Dr. Suhair Al-Alami

Al Ghurair University, Dubai, UAE

s.e.alalami@agu.ac.ae

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying lockdowns all over the world have changed the way students learn English as a Foreign language (EFL) amongst other subjects. Higher Education institutions have currently transformed the traditional mode of instruction into online classes where teaching and learning take place virtually. The concept of language teaching as transmission of information from instructors to students has now become relatively archaic. Nowadays, students should foster transferable academic skills to be able to communicate effectively, whether online or face-to-face, interacting whilst using Blackboard Ultra Collaborate and the like. They should also be able to independently read for information as well as for pleasure, write for a variety of purposes employing language in stretches of discourse, think critically and creatively, and conduct research investigating issues of use. Online instruction of EFL can have its deficiencies, thus obstructing teaching and learning effectiveness. This paper highlights some of the main issues regarding online teaching and learning of EFL during the COVID-19 pandemic era. Seeking appropriate solutions, the paper proposes some suggestions and activities such as implementing virtual exchange projects. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for Higher Education institutions and EFL scholars to consider.

Keywords: Communication Skills; COVID-19 Pandemic; EFL; Higher Education

Introduction

Shocked for a wink and a blink, educational life seemed to have halted for a while. University premises with nobody to occupy and utilize! Was it a nightmare or an agonizing moment? The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has shocked the whole world at large. Not only has the COVID-19 shock covered aspects such as those of health and economy, but it has also extended to impact social occasions, family gatherings, and educational systems. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, has forced many Higher Education institutions

to remain closed, shifting into a new mode of teaching and learning, namely online.

To maintain high standards of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic era, the author of the current paper suggests implementing virtual exchange projects as a purposeful activity whilst shedding light on this type of projects in terms of definition; procedures; and assessment. Additionally, the author highlights six points to revisit regularly. These are: attention grabbing, performance elicitation, strategy selection, empathy, formative assessment, and

rigorous evaluation. The last part of the paper concludes with several recommendations for Higher Education institutions and EFL scholars to consider.

Literature Review

This part of the paper discusses some points which are currently related to online learning. Online learning, also known as e-learning, can be defined as an educational experience in which both synchronous and asynchronous means of communication are used. Asynchronous and synchronous facilities provide students with the flexibility of being anywhere for them to learn and interact with instructors as well as with other students (Singh and Thurman, 2019; Littlefield, 2018). Online learning is a tool which can allow for learning processes to be more student-centered, ensuring more flexibility. It is worth noting in this context that IT infrastructure is a pre-condition for effective online teaching and learning experiences.

Online learning can be affordable as it is cheaper when considering transportation (Dhawan, 2020). It can also accelerate students' pace of learning as students can schedule their course time wherever they are (Saxena, 2020). Liguori and Winkler (2020) state that physical distance, personalized pedagogy, and scale are amongst the major challenges which institutions are currently encountering in relation to online teaching and learning. In Martin's opinion (2020), ensuring effective instruction; motivating students; emphasizing mental wellbeing; presenting stimulating input; and maintaining good relationships are five essential points to emphasize as regards e-learning experiences. A number of scholars

such as Kebritchi et al. (2017) argue that developing relevant online content, managing class time, employing a variety of instructional strategies, covering the curriculum, and engaging learners in class activities are authentic challenges for educators to wisely encounter.

On the other hand, online learning may have several drawbacks. The problems may include downloading mistakes, poor quality of audio and video, weak internet connection, and lack of training in dealing with learning management systems (Parkes et al., 2014). Both instructors and students may face weak internet connection issues which in turn will hinder students' progress and weaken quality outcomes (Favale et al., 2020). At this critical point of time though, the issue which bothers educationalists the most is not necessarily quality education. Instead, it is whether or not universities and schools can utilize online facilities sufficiently well (Carey, 2020).

The author of this paper believes that online instruction of English as a foreign language (EFL) imposes a number of challenges, some of which are technical friendliness; some interactional convenience; and some technological readiness. Technical friendliness entails sufficiency of meeting online requirements, interactional convenience entails smoothness of virtual communication, and technological readiness entails acquisition of IT competencies. Online instruction of EFL, however, has a number of advantages the most prominent of which are autonomous learning, student-centeredness, and possibly practicality in terms of time management.

Methods

With English as a lingua franca in mind, it has become essential to equip EFL learners with effective communication skills for lifelong learning whether in the presence or absence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective language communication manifests itself in interlocutors' ability to convey the message fluently, accurately, and appropriately. Bearing this point in mind, the author of the current paper is of the opinion that virtual exchange projects can augment EFL students' communicative competence whilst at the same time enhancing mastery of language skills in general. As the name indicates, virtual exchange projects are online-based tasks which involve virtual interactions amongst language learners belonging to institutions geographically distant and culturally different (Al-Alami, 2019).

Virtual exchange projects are conducted to upgrade language proficiency. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift in how most learning educational projects can be arranged. First, classes belonging to different institutions usually have different course syllabi and course proficiency levels which, normally speaking, can be found in the same era. Virtual exchange projects can be implemented using technologically advanced communication tools. Third, time and space are no exception. Commenting on the three virtual exchange projects arranged since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, there are three main issues to be considered. First, IT literacy via online platforms and technological applications through utilizing synchronous and asynchronous means of communication. Reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic era, virtual exchange projects can be viewed as inspiring tools which would empower participants linguistically, technologically, academically, and socially. Though remotely applied, virtual exchange projects can transcend the physical world both palpably and tangibly. Guth and Helm (2012) assert that virtual exchange projects within English language teaching contexts should be planned in such a way that cooperation and coordination between instructors in relation to setting, implementing, and evaluating projects is maintained and sustained.

Recognizing the remarkable contribution virtual exchange projects can play in terms of polishing learners' communication skills amongst other academic gains, the author of this paper has organized several virtual exchange projects at the institution where she works, involving the students of the course Communication Skills. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the author has engaged in administering virtual exchange projects each academic semester. Comprised of the author and another associate teaching professor working at one of the American universities in Florida as the concerned instructors, virtual exchange projects last seven weeks each academic semester. Clearly detailed instructions on what to do during implementation stages are discussed with students prior to the commencement of the project.

To motivate students extrinsically and intrinsically, the project is allotted ten percent of the assessment items' percentage of the course Communication Skills. Each student is assigned a pen pal belonging to the same gender from the other institution. The project assignment includes two parts: weekly emails and a final report. Weekly emails should be substantive and should be of approximately two-hundred and fifty words each, depicting different topics of interest to students such as cultural traditions, college experiences, touristic places, local food, and career goals. Fruitful experiences are exchanged remotely whilst regularly communicating online. Besides email exchange, online communication includes but is not limited to Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. The final report needs to be submitted online by a given date including two parts: a record of the emails which students have exchanged to be saved as one PDF, and a discussion of the topics of conversation; communication challenges; positive experiences; lessons learned; and both the camera and microphone can be

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efficiently used. EFL quality education, on the other hand, involves pre-requisite factors such as planning and training amongst others. While teaching, provision of adequate practice whereby each student has an ample opportunity to read for information and pleasure; write to convey a wide range of purposes; listen to identify gist and main details; and speak to express thoughts and feelings should be emphasized.

Below are six points which the author of this paper suggests, to ensure that attainment targets are met.

-Attention Grabbing. At the beginning of each online class, EFL instructors need to capture students' attention through warm-up activities. Based on the nature of the course and the specific objectives of the lesson, instructors should devise activities the aim of which is to arouse students' interest and motivation. If, for instance, the course is mainly concerned with augmenting communication skills, students can be encouraged to reflect on English articles and books they have read, English programs and movies they have watched, or pleasant experiences they have had. Instructors can also assign a word as the word of the day for all students to use in a variety of meaningful examples. Furthermore, informing learners of the learning objectives of each lesson is necessary. Whether online or offline, awareness of what should be acquired in terms of knowledge and skill is essential. Equally important for EFL instructors is stimulating recall of pre-requisites and prior learning. A major pre-requisite in the COVID-19 pandemic era classes is that of possessing related IT knowledge and skill.

For Higher Education institutions to ensure quality education at this critical stage is, therefore, to provide each and every student with adequate training in the skill of employing technological facilities and handling unexpected issues.

-Performance Elicitation. During online classes, EFL instructors need to present language input and stimuli whilst guiding, mentoring, and supervising students. Eliciting performance within online class contexts is a challenge, yet worth instructors' efforts. Based on the author's experience in teaching online classes for EFL undergraduates, oral presentations; gamification; language games; group work activities; intensive and extensive reading tasks; journal writing; and virtual exchange projects are both inspiring and stimulating.

-Strategy Selection. Use of optimal strategies to employ when in online classes has a significant role with regard to teaching effectiveness. For language enhancement purposes, EFL instructors should employ a combination of audio, video, and text based strategies whilst maintaining interaction with their students. EFL instructors should also urge students to have adequate practice of EFL skills even when the teaching and learning systems are disrupted due to causes such as the COVID-19 pandemic. If sufficient practice opportunities are not prioritized through means of effective strategies, learners may not be able to maximize their potential in full.

-Empathy. The COVID-19 pandemic has globally affected many families to a breaking point due to struggling with job loss amongst other causes. Hence, EFL

instructors have to create a conducive online learning environment where students' emotional need for communication is met. A suggestion which can be of use here is to expand allocation of instructors' consultation time for as is known, allocating students' queries sufficient time is expected to accelerate learning processes. Another helpful suggestion is to virtually hold individual meetings with students on a regular basis. During such virtual sessions, students should be requested to portray areas of disturbance. Students need to feel that their instructors are willing and ready not only to nurture knowledge and develop skill, but also to lend a sympathetic ear. Attentive listening to students' issues of disturbance will make it possible for students to share moments of low spirit and unsettled state with their instructors. What is more, redesigning EFL programs and courses should be geared towards fulfilling learners' needs academically, emotionally, socially, and professionally.

-Formative Assessment. Throughout the journey of online teaching and learning, conducting formative assessment regularly will raise students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, yielding growth and progress. Rather than comparing students to each other within the same online class, EFL instructors should support learners' academic achievements considering diagnostic assessment results amongst other means. Regular provision of online feedback, whether recorded or written, should be an integral part of online classes since it might not be possible for an EFL student learning via means of online systems

to be fully aware of the errors he/she has made.

-Rigorous Evaluation. Rigorous evaluation is a comprehensive process which enables the concerned parties to identify the visible and invisible outcomes in pursuit of enlightenment, integrity, and distinction. Rigorous evaluation is intended to make a judgment which must be transparent, objective, reliable, and target oriented. To achieve objectivity, validity, reliability, and credibility, the process itself should be considered as important as the outcome is. Concerned with EFL instruction in the COVID-19 pandemic era, the parties to evaluate and be evaluated are management, IT departments, faculty members, and students. Through evaluation processes, what we need to address, analyze and judge will be infrastructure technology, planning for sustainability, provision of digital teaching and learning materials, readiness of all concerned parties to be actively involved in the teaching and learning processes, students' motivation, interactions between instructors and students, pedagogical methodologies, and educational activities. Most importantly, practicality and integrity of assessment procedures are to be thoroughly examined.

Conclusion

Portrayed by an accelerated expansion of knowledge revolution, the COVID-19 pandemic era compels us to create a balanced formula whereby technological advancements are sedulously and meticulously absorbed and installed. Technological advancements can enable EFL instructors and learners to combat deficiencies at times of crisis. Logically

speaking, however, technological facilities cannot replace EFL instructors, but they still have a role to play in respect of boosting pedagogy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that online learning via means of technological facilities will be an integral component of the future of EFL teaching and learning, which thus requires that instructors and students alike foster technology-related skills. The COVID-19 pandemic has dragged us into a new era of EFL instruction. If we do not manipulate the moment thoughtfully enough, we may encounter the risk of not filling in the gaps created by the pandemic. If, on the other hand, we capture and seize the moment as a springboard for a novel journey of accomplishment, we will be able to equip EFL students with not only a repertoire of language skills and communication competencies, but also with lifelong skills for health and wealth of mind; heart; and spirit.

A stimulating activity for EFL instructors to devise, amongst other activities, is that of implementing virtual exchange projects. If flawlessly implemented, virtual exchange projects would make it possible for participants to live the unseen places and unheard voices delectably. What we need to ensure will be availability of reliable infrastructure technology, provision of well-designed digital tasks, coordination and cooperation between instructors, and emphasis on conducting assessment with rigor amongst other factors.

Healthy change is a gradual process which necessitates training of all concerned parties. This implies the need to train instructors and students in the skill of how to deal with novel digital systems amongst other requirements. A step-by-step diagnostic approach to training should be applied with tenacity and persistence. Additionally, a great deal of time and effort should be invested in designing online language programs and courses to impart EFL education whilst coping with today's conditions and requirements sensibly and prudently.

To conclude, witnessing an era so highly challenging, so rapidly transforming, and so increasingly demanding that we need to leave behind years of experience and commence a new phase, the current circumstances may lessen growth and sustainability of EFL quality education. Nevertheless, what is university professors' mission if not to overcome obstacles, paving the path for a better future yet to come, brightening; promising; and fulfilling?!

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