

USING ONLINE COLLABORATIVE WRITING AS A PRE-SPEAKING TASK: INTEGRATION OF ICT IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Integration of ICT in language education has led to many successful experiments and researches. By comparing the efficacy of face-to-face tasks versus online tasks, researchers have recommended the inclusion of online tasks in regular classroom practice and encouraged teachers to replace traditional tasks with digital tasks. However, from language testing perspective, both these task modes have different features: the testing framework for face-to-face tasks does not fit the digital tasks, and vice versa. In this article, an attempt has been made to blend the online tasks with the traditional speaking tasks for a better output in the target language. Tertiary level ESL learners were exposed to online writing discussion tasks followed by actual face-to-face discussion tasks. Their reflective journals and semi-structured interviews were analyzed to see their perception on online tasks and their effectiveness in the target language learning. The results of the study showed positive influence of online pre-speaking tasks on the actual speaking tasks in terms of decreasing learners' anxiety to participate in the face-to-face discussions and increasing the task familiarity. Therefore, the study recommends using online discussion tasks as pre-task for face-to-face discussion tasks.

Keywords: ESL, Online collaboration, ICT, Integration of ICT, Online discussion

Introduction

It has become more of a fashion statement to have computers or multimedia in schools. Its implementation is often not more than cosmetic (NCFTE, 2009). Integration of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the modern day education can be seen both as a success as well as a failure. It is success as it has updated the stakeholders of education with the most recent and variety of knowledge. Its implementation, however, to a certain extent has been a failure due to the over dependence on technology. The availability of ready made materials often tends to mislead inexperienced teachers to use it blindly in their classrooms without considering its suitability. Particularly, in second language education, the endless materials bank (including, PPTs, worksheets,

online tests, teaching materials, etc.) available online often tempts teachers to bring them all to their classroom. They often adopt those materials instead of 'adapting'. Therefore, it is often the wrong selection of materials and poor quality of execution that causes defame of ICT.

On the other hand, with the proliferation of advanced technology, there are hardly any students who find use of technology in the classroom an alien. According to TCS GenY Survey (2014) Indian students spend one hour every day on social media and much more than that online. Therefore, the use of overhead projector, smart-boards and audio visual aids alone does not mean integrating technology in the classroom. Students' increasing exposure to technology poses a great challenge for the teachers to make their classes innovative and engaging. The issue

raised in this paper is how teachers can blend technology and traditional instructions in a language classroom to complement each other and bring about successful language learning output. A number of studies have used online tools to facilitate language learning through communication.

A study conducted by Chapman, et al., (2008) showed that the participants in the study were motivated to participate in the online board discussions as they received positive comments on their posts. They felt obligated to respond to the other participants in order to maintain social fellowship. In the research conducted by Mitchem, et al. (2008), learners were allowed to collaborate online to exchange their ideas with their peers. They used bulletin boards as the tool for discussions. The results of the study showed that there was a huge enhancement in their content knowledge due to online negotiation.

Lee (2001) suggested that online interaction is the ideal platform for language learners to negotiate for meaning. The researcher found out that the nature of online synchronous discussion is quite similar to the natural face-to-face discussion. The collaborative nature of online discussion tasks helps learners in exchanging ideas about content and language. The repeated exposure helps them noticing not only forms but meaning as well. While negotiating for meaning and form, learners use variety of communicative strategies such as confirmation checks, request for clarification, etc. The use of these strategies helps them to modify their output in order to make it comprehensible for their interlocutors. The study supports Long's (1981) interaction hypothesis that interactive negotiation is not only crucial to second language acquisition (SLA), but it also fosters

learners' language development. Another similar study in the area of online learning by Baglione and Nastanski (2007) suggested that the combination of online and face-to-face classroom instruction can encourage learners to build and express their own ideas more than the traditional classroom setup.

The existing literature, therefore, has recommended the use of online tasks or blending online tasks with the traditional face-to-face tasks in the second language classroom. However, there is no uniformity in opinion among the researchers about at which stage of second language learning online tasks should be used.

The theoretical argument for task sequencing can be taken from Prabhu's (1987) experiment in his well-known Bangalore project. In his experiment, he recommended using parallel tasks instead of giving heavy instructions and explaining learners the logic of main task. Presenting parallel tasks before the main task helped learners to gain task familiarity and confidence to participate in the main task. Prabhu suggested that organising and presenting tasks in a logical sequence helps teachers to track the growth of the learners and adjust the input whenever required.

Therefore, in this study, an attempt has been made to see the effectiveness of online discussion task as pre-speaking tasks. The study has also looked at the features of online discussion that affect learners' performance during oral discussions.

Sample of the Study

This study was pitched at tertiary level and 22 engineering graduates (14 males and 8 females) from Aurora Institute of Research

and Technology (India) participated in this study. Their age ranged between 18 and 21 years. All the participants had English as their second language and got exposure to it for approximately 10 years only in academic context. Proficiency in technology was the dependent variable while selecting the participants for the study. All the participants belonged to different levels of proficiency in English. Before starting the intervention, the researcher conducted a meeting with all the participants who were willing to participate in the study. Though the research plan was not discussed with them completely, they were given a blur idea about it. To know participants' technical proficiency, a checklist was given where the participants had to tick on the fact that was applicable to them. The participants who believed they were good at use of technical devices and active on social media were chosen as sample for the study. However, it was also important to understand their proficiency in English language. Therefore, the selected participants had to take a general language proficiency test that was adapted from the Course of Proficiency, EFL University. The proficiency test had overall English skills components. The participants were categorised in advanced, intermediate and basic proficiency groups. The majority of the students were in the intermediate proficiency level.

Procedure of Data Collection

For online discussions facebook chats were used. It was made sure that all the participants had a facebook account already and they knew how to operate it. The researcher created a facebook page to which all the participants were added. Though the participants already knew how to participate

in chat discussions, the researcher provided them instructions on things to consider while participating in online discussions. The instructions were mainly about making their stance clear while commenting or responding to others' comments, maintaining cohesion and coherence while participating, etc. The researcher created the online chat groups for each round of discussion and made sure that every group was heterogeneous in terms of their proficiency in English. For every round of online discussion, the researcher changed the group members in order to make the discussion more natural and to avoid the effect of over familiarity. All the online discussion happened out of the classroom after the college time. Participants had a choice to choose the discussion time according to their convenience. After each online discussion, participants had to participate in face-to-face discussions inside the classroom. In face-to-face discussions, the researcher shuffled the groups again. Online discussion groups did not remain the same during the face-to-face discussions. This helped the researcher to avoid repetition of the ideas in face-to-face discussions as the topic for the same were similar. The researcher posted topics (often of social issues) as the conversation titles for online discussions. Later the same topic was elaborated in its scope and presented for face-to-face discussions. This was done for two main reasons. Firstly, the online discussion topics helped activating learners schema on these topics and they could participate more in face-to-face discussions. Secondly, the elaboration of topics in face-to-face discussion required students to think critically and modify their output (from online discussion) to cope with the scope of the topic and the new group members. During

the intervention, the participants were given journals to maintain. They were instructed to write their experiences in participating both the discussions and if they see any changes in themselves. At the end of the study, all the participants were interviewed and asked to reflect on their experiences of participating in online and face-to-face discussions.

Learners' responses were audio recorded and transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected from participants' journals and interviews was qualitatively analysed. It was coded to identify the patterns in their perception of online discussions and its effect on their oral speaking performance in the classroom. The semi-structured interviews focused more on the participants' perception on online discussion tasks. The episodes from their journals and interviews helped the researcher to draw conclusions of the effectiveness of online discussion tasks. In the reflective journals, one participant expressed his experience of participating in an online discussion for the first time:

[Episode 1]

*"Online discussion sounds interesting and the topic was also interesting. This was a different experience that I never had before in my life. This was a **great place to overcome the problems that you face in face-to-face discussion. Like thinking time**"*

In his perspective, online discussions offered him extra time to plan his output and then present it. The same participant during the semi-structured interview extended how he felt comfortable during online discussions:

[Episode 2]

*"In my first f2f discussion, **I was little afraid about how to start and proceed and also because of eye contact, people around me.** But in online discussion, I could write anything and there was no eye contact, no time limit and I had my own space"*

In his response, the participant compares the task conditions in online and face-to-face discussion and expresses the benefits of online discussion task condition for him to participate. Learners often feel shy, conscious or afraid of making mistakes in front of their peer group. In the online discussion, in a more natural condition, learners can overcome these fears and perform better. While asked about the effect of online discussions on their face-to-face discussion performance, the participants said:

[Episode 3]

*"On online discussions we have enough time to think. We could understand the mistakes that were made in online discussions and corrected them in face-to-face discussion. Also we understood **how to use connecting phrases while talking.**"*

[Episode 4]

*"I could remember the points that I had used in on screen display while I was in f2fd since the topics were very similar, **I could get a very good start from my earlier discussion.....In OSD another benefit is that you can take help of online resource for something you don't know.** Therefore understanding of the topic becomes better."*

[Episode 5]

*"I was very tensed initially as this was my first f2f discussion. **Many points from online discussion***

were recollected and everyone in the group was giving their contribution. We concluded same as in online that understanding plays a vital role in any relationship. This discussion was good and a different experience for me..”

In this set of responses, the participants mentioned that the online discussions helped them in avoiding the affective factors that obstruct their face-to-face communication in English. They talked about having not to see the teacher or other peers during online discussions gave them freedom to express themselves without worrying about criticism. They did not feel obligated to participate in the discussion before they were ready. Another important benefit of online discussions mentioned by one of the participants was that he could avoid particular mistakes in face-to-face discussions that he had made during the online discussions. Lastly, due to the similar topics and nature of the discussion, participants could recall the points that they discussed during online discussions and gave them a good start in face-to-face discussions.

While talking about the benefits of online collaboration, participants said:

[Episode 6]

*“When we start the discussion we have limited points, but **when different people come up with different points, it adds to my understanding of the topic.** Initially I had limited points but gradually I started understanding the topics better. And therefore, it helps me performing better.”*

[Episode 7]

*“We get inspiration from others. Both in online and face-to-face discussions, many people were doing better than me, so **I tried to follow them.***

*For example, Kaleem, he has been using better comments and sentences than me. So **I learned how to use the comments.** I followed him and he also gave me suggestions on how to take turns.”*

In this segment of the interview, the participants expressed how others motivated them to perform better through peer feedback and observation. The reading and writing feature of online collaboration caused noticing of not only meaning but also form. Therefore, the participants could not only understand the input but also tended to make it as a part of their own output. Therefore, online discussions helped learners to reach their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, Vygotsky, 1978) through collaborative scaffolding by their peers.

In sum, online discussion tasks before actual speaking tasks prepared learners to participate in main task by providing task familiarity. It also helped learners to overcome the communication hurdles in English, which they faced earlier. Therefore, with the responses provided by the participants, it can be said that providing online discussion tasks before actual discussion tasks have a positive impact on learners' performance.

Conclusion

The results of the study revealed that online discussion task functions best as a pre-speaking task and has a lot of similar features of natural communication. At the same time, it reduces learners' anxiety of participating in any discussion tasks. With its natural like communicative features, online discussion task creates an ideal condition for the novice language learners to participate without

being affected by social factors. The writing mode in online discussion provides learners ample time to think and plan their output before they contribute. Therefore, they gain confidence in participating in face-to-face discussions and rely on their knowledge that

they negotiated during the pre-task. Above all, the collaborative nature of online discussions provides a threat free practice to novice language learners to participate in actual conversations successfully.

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