

Foreign Languages Acquisition Through Virtual Learning Platforms: A Case Study of Arabic Language

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Received: December 03, 2019

Accepted: January 07, 2020

ABSTRACT: *Correspondence Education has a long history in Adult Education; right from the sixties, distance teaching and learning has been made possible by means of media which can be covered across the Globe. In most cases, instructional materials were posted to learners. But in this new modern technology age, foreign language acquisition is effected mostly through the internet. This paper will focus on the following: distance learning and virtual classes, the role of Arabic language, the concept of virtual classes, what are the challenges in applying virtual platforms, and lastly implications and Conclusion.*

Key Words: *foreign, languages, acquisition, virtual learning*

Introduction

Interaction plays a crucial role in facilitating language learning input. The success of the learning process relies on some way or another on extent to which a comprehensive interactive system for second/foreign language (L2) learners is provided. Learners and teachers need to strike a balance between (a) exchanging thoughts and ideas, and (b) ensure that there is an effective communicative learning process. Thus, implementing the right patterns of interaction is considered fundamental in an L2 language class to accomplish the intended learning objectives.

However, due to the current global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Education system throughout the world has been forced into a kind of closure, and instruction has been converted from face-to-face learning in real classrooms to e-learning classes to ensure some measure of educational continuity. The development of e-learning has expanded to a great extent to include a variety of online learning approaches such as virtual classes, video conferencing and blended learning. Although virtual classes have different tools that are designed to offer effective content, reinforcement, interaction and real-time feedback to learners through online sessions, it is often difficult to compare their effectiveness to that of traditional classes, especially with respect to language learning as the latter needs a comprehensible input, direct interaction and constructive feedback to enhance the learning process. All the education initiations in all stages (schools, colleges, universities...,etc) with no exception, have been closed and transitioned to remote learning to ensure learning continuity through the rest of the academic year. Accordingly, most Arabic language classes for undergraduate students have been delivered online through virtual classes to catch-up with the Arabic language syllabus and stay on course with the pacing plan for the preparatory year. Therefore, this study focused in the effectiveness of virtual classes on learners' interaction. The potential value of e-learning and distance learning has been studied extensively.

Distance Learning and Virtual Classes

The potential value of computers and digital technology for education has been examined over the past few decades as technology (and, more specifically, its application to educational environments) has dramatically proliferated (Khoshsima & Sayadi, 2016). Technology and computers are now commonly used as teaching aids in classrooms as well as for the distribution of information, class resources, and extra class materials outside of class. The widespread use of a number of other digital technologies has also emerged in addition to developments in the internet to aid in learning, including videoconferencing, TV broadcasting, satellite broadcasting, and videotaping (Khoshsima & Sayadi, 2016). Since the 2000s, we have also seen the emergence of more online learning and virtual classrooms (Balcikanli, 2012 and Dalgarno, 2002).

A virtual classroom is a type of "electronic classroom that can be expandable in time, space, and content" (Beatty, 2013, p. 156). They are synchronous, meaning that they are "live," and students engage in them at the same time (Çakýroglu, 2014). Hussein (2016) emphasised that virtual classrooms have many of the same characteristics as physical classrooms but without the same limitations. They allow interaction

between students and teachers through several media, including oral communication, texts, video conversation, audio chat and PowerPoint presentations (Yadav, 2016). Depending on the particular virtual classroom platform used, students and teachers may also share content via whiteboards, break - out virtual rooms, shared web browsing, feedback and even the sharing of applications; different online tools (Cakiroglu, 2014; Hamouda, 2020). Virtual classrooms have the advantage that they can be accessed in different places and at different times. As students are increasingly considered to be digital natives and prefer to interact and socialize online, virtual classrooms may be an especially effective way to engage them in education (Hamouda, 2020). Since their emergence, educational researchers have taken very seriously the question of whether virtual classrooms can be as effective as physical classrooms in terms of facilitating productive learning environments and educational outcomes of students. Notably, researchers have found somewhat conflicting results. For example, Ng (2007) collected qualitative data from interviews with both students and tutors on the use of a virtual classroom (Interwise) for tutoring at the Open University of Hong Kong. Students and tutors were overall very positive about the platform and believed it was an effective learning environment. However, the informants reported several technical difficulties, and they also revealed that student - to - student interaction was minimal on the platform (Ng, 2007). Rather than seeing the virtual classroom as a replacement for tutorials, both the students and the tutors saw it as a useful complement to face - to - face tutorials (Ng, 2007).

McBrien et al. carried out another qualitative study on the use of Elluminate Live! for teaching undergraduate and graduate college classes to students in an American college (McBrien, et al., 2009). The classes were held in the departments of special education and psychology. Students tended to perceive the online classes as facilitating student engagement; they perceived greater student engagement through online classes than in face - to - face classes as well as increased learner autonomy. However, some students also thought that the chat could become a little overwhelming, and that they missed the non - verbal communication that came from in - person interactions. They also noted that difficulties with the technology, like signing on and microphone issues were real barriers to participation (McBrien, et al., 2009). In a review of the impact of online colleges on student success, Bettinger, Fox, Loeb, & Taylor (2017) found that fully online courses tended to have lower levels of student success and lower grades. They also found that the students taking online courses made less progress in college than students who attended in - person classes, and they were also less likely to remain in university (Bettinger et al., 2017). Together, the research seems to suggest that virtual classrooms have some promise as an effective teaching tool, but there could also be some real drawbacks, especially when an entire class is delivered online for EFL subjects.

The role of Arabic language

In the age of advanced and rapid technology, the interest in language has expanded, especially, in the time of the intensive spread of communication's tools between people. That is, language plays a vital role as a means of communication. This situation pushed every nation to maintain its language from melting and fusion in order to have a place among other languages of the world. Soman (2012) pointed out that with the increased interest in technology; we are witnessing an increasing interest in Arabic language comparing to other languages in the world. This indication came from the act of some countries such as China that encourages its people to learn the Arabic language because of its importance in the changeable world (Al-Khawaldeh, 2015 and Jafar, 2009).

According to Shoaib (2015), language, generally, has three main functions. It is the first pillar in the process of thinking. Further, it represents the basis of knowledge and it is the primary means of communication and understanding. Dumas (2009) explained that the Arabic language is considered as the tool that transferred the Arab culture through the centuries and connected different generations with each other.

The Concepts of Virtual Platforms

Virtual learning has created a new way to visit places that were not accessible in order to achieve educational goals. Virtual trips strategy, comparing to traditional teaching methods, is an interactive learning environment that contains a set of tools activated by voice, image, and movement, which allows the learner to recognize places without actually visiting them.

Al-Halafawi (2011) presented a set of characteristics and features that should be available in virtual environments. One of them is validity. This means that creating the environment of virtual reality should represent the reality and the interactive integration; in which the learner does not interact with virtual

reality from the outside, but he/she interacts to become a part of it. This technology empowers the user to embed idea in the person of the user.

According to Pantelidis (2009) the virtual reality has several advantages in the educational field. It presents teaching in an attractive manner that contains fun and entertainment. Further, it creates the interaction between the learner and the experience that should be learned directly. In addition, it enriches learning and teaching processes with real experiences. Furthermore, virtual reality provides learners with safe environment when they try to learn from dangerous experiences or when they attempt to learn about faraway places that could not be reached physically.

Challenges in Virtual Learning

Despite the advantages in the new technological method in learning system, there are some challenges with interaction in virtual classrooms that have been noted (Al-Kathiri, 2015). Some have acknowledged that one of the challenges of virtual classrooms is the opportunity for technical difficulties (Al-Kathiri, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2019; Ng, 2007; Olbertz-Siitonen, 2015). For example, in virtual learning environments that rely on video, it is common for students to experience delays or “lagging,” which can reduce the effectiveness of the interaction (Rusk & Pörn, 2019). Research on delay in video-mediated learning environments does suggest that while these types of delays are ubiquitous, learners can typically manage to maintain meaning and develop some L2 learning strategies to manage the difficulty they may face. It may also be expected that with improvements in technology and internet speed, these types of technical delays will become less and less of an important limitation. Still, technical difficulties may reduce some interaction or participation at least for some individuals.

Also, students have noted some difficulty using educational technologies, even while acknowledging that personal digital device use in education is common and increasing (Herrera, 2017). Similarly, they noted that not all educational institutions had computer laboratories or internet connections available that could support the widespread use of such technologies (Herrera, 2017). Researchers therefore suggest that any use of virtual classrooms should be accompanied by rigorous testing of the platform as well as adequate instruction for students about how to use it (Bianchi et al., 2018).

However, online language education isn't right for everyone, and there are plentiful shortcomings:

1. Lack of Face-To-Face Interaction

The interaction between a teacher and a student is an intrinsic part of the educational process, and the face-to-face approach is an efficient language learning method because it combines different segments, including writing, speaking, listening, and reading.

Most students seem more involved in the conventional classroom and receive more immediate feedback than in online studies. The response time is less, but many learners prefer presenting issues with the instructor in person than typing it out or trying to explain it face-to-screen.

2. No Self-Discipline, Low Motivation, and Distractions

Human beings tend to have lazy attitudes, especially when they do not have to follow strict rules. Online study in itself is a great way, but if you are not self-disciplined, it becomes complicated; you will have enough excuses to postpone or miss your sessions. If you're not motivated enough and don't maintain self-control, you will delay or perhaps end up not studying at all. If you want to be a successful online learner, you need impulse, motivation, self-directed, disciplined, and need to follow stringent time management.

If you are taking online classes from home, work, or anywhere, be sure that there will be disturbances. Students in e-learning programs often multitask with non-academic matters that waste lots of time; you cannot entirely exclude the possibility of distractions unless you have cultivated the art of self-control.

3. Less Interactive Sessions and No discussions with the fellow Students

One of the disadvantages of online language learning is less interactive sessions, which eventually leads to dullness in the learner. Language is something that demands people around to talk with and learn from it.

The traditional system gives us interactive sessions, in online training, you have to do a self-study by utilizing resources like books, language apps, LMS, software, or an online tutor, the vast majority of communication is only between student-to-instructor, and there is an absolute deficiency of student to student exchanges.

However, at schools, universities, and learning centers, students discover how to make friends and learn tremendously from each other. Competition between colleagues can be very stimulating and exciting, and you will undoubtedly gain from it. Online learning cannot offer group interaction the way it occurs in the standard classroom or lecture room. You will figure out the art of productive communication, improve

from other's weaknesses and strengths, and all this will assist you in acquiring a second tongue quickly and with certainty and confidence.

4. More Time Consuming

Online learning is both time-saving and time-consuming. It saves time as you can attend classes from the convenience of your home or wherever you are because you need not travel to another location. It takes more time since people lack self-discipline and not able to implement time management properly. In the absence of a fixed schedule, too many distractions, multitasking, and lack of a designated study area can lead to poor scheduling. It is a disadvantage because it creates a carefree, lazy, and distractive learning environment. It also takes more time for educators to make digital study material, prepare the lessons, teach, and clarify their doubts.

There are also many interruptions and stoppages because of the problem happening with PC, laptop, or Smartphone, internet connectivity, and speed. When you learn online, you need to put in more effort to get command if you pursue one of the hardest languages like Russian, Arabic, Farsi, Japanese, Mandarin, or Korean.

5. It isn't easy to become fluent

If you are a total beginner, learning a new language via a Mobile App or occasional online tutoring can help. But what if your goal is to become a language specialist like translators or interpreters? It is tricky to achieve advanced knowledge, especially if your target isn't one of the simplest languages. But you can make a good start, and it can be beneficial in gaining at least a basic grasp of a language. Once you cover the elementary or even lower intermediate level, you can decide if you want to take it further by enrolling in any language school or university.

Implications and Conclusion

Despite the above mentioned limitations, it must be realized that the online education potential is immense. Although electronic, people interact with it through reading and writing, for this reason alone, the internet is a technology that is without doubt has significant implications for both teaching and learning of Arabic Language at distance.

This implies that learners themselves should be responsible for the process of learning, because, the teacher is physically far. The learners must be encouraged to enhance their capacities for reflection and should be able to direct themselves. They should have a framework to guide their progress. They should be supported and given the opportunity to practice within the course materials.

Instructors must become familiar with using the internet and its various functions such as PC, laptop, or Smartphone, internet connectivity, zoom, e.t.c. They must also learn how to use specific search tools in order to access information. If all these are in order with an improvement in power supply in Nigeria, the virtual platforms will continue to be a tool for Arabic Language teaching and learning at distance.

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