

Using e-Learning to Develop Students' English Skills

Choosri Banditvilai

Abstract—This article examines a teacher's experience when incorporating e-learning into a university level reading course. It presents a case study at Kasetsart University in Thailand. The aim of this study is to compare the achievements of two groups of students. The first group studied "English Reading" course in the classroom, while the second studied this subject supplemented by e-learning with parallel reading lessons. The effects of this method were investigated with the use of e-learning lessons, achievement test, a questionnaire and interviews. The findings were predominantly positive, in favor of e-learning, suggesting that teachers should use e-learning as a teaching aid to assist in developing students' English reading skills.

Index Terms—E-learning, basic English reading, parallel reading lessons.

I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomena of "e-learning" has recently gained much popularity with students around the world. This paper aims to show how it is not only popular but also beneficial in helping students towards higher achievements. We are now living in a network society where a new technological innovation is becoming more widespread in use for educational purposes. E-learning is a self-learning process using IT communication networks and computers. European Commission has described the e-learning as the use of Internet and new multimedia technologies to advance the quality of learning by providing access to resources and services as well as enabling remote exchange and collaboration [1]. E-learning plays an important role in transforming an organization into a learning organization [2]. E-learning is an important tool for accelerating the effectiveness of organizational learning [3]. It is described as "anywhere-anytime learning". With this kind of learning, students and instructors can communicate, consult and exchange their opinions as they would in a typical classroom by using modern communication technology, for example, email, twitter, chat rooms, podcasting, blogs, You Tube, Skype, mobile phones and web-boards. Heiser and Nicholson [4] note that the online environment offers a fresh and demanding context in which to manage interactions with learners based on more flexible and a diverse engagement methods, and this requires different skills and values.

During 2012-2015, Thai government promoted the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), students are provided with opportunities to enhance their studies by accessing knowledge from every part of the world through digital learning. Interactive e-learning project was initiated to provide distance learning through an educational satellite link.

Moreover, under the ICT plan, Thai government aims to equalize education at international level.

To enhance the educational opportunities, the government therefore launched many projects such as "One tablet per child" with free Wi-Fi in public places, learning rooms with educational software and e-books. E-learning programs were developed to change schools to life-long learning centers and to promote knowledge-based society [5], [6]. The introduction of ICT in language teaching has opened new horizons for language teachers to have more interactive and learner-centered classroom environment [7].

In 2011, Tanveer [8] conducted a research study on "Integrating e-learning in Classroom-based Language Teaching: Perceptions, Challenges and Strategies." In his study, he finds that teachers and learners perceive that e-learning can help students take the ownership of their (own) learning by making them autonomous and to interact freely, provide diversification of activities, foster intrinsic impetus of learning, permit the acquisition of valuable study and time management skills and allow teachers to have a more student-centered form of learning [9]. In 2012, Farooq & Javid [10] examined the impact of e-learning on English language learning at the undergraduate level of Taif University, with the result of the study showing that e-learning played an effective role in language learning by providing activities in each language skill in an innovative and motivating manner. In another study by Chhabra [11] on the use of e-learning tools in teaching English, the results show that the teaching of English has been affected a great deal by the use of modern technological tools. Soliman [12] reinforces this assessment by carrying out a study on the use of e-learning to help develop EFL students' language skills and to activate their independent learning. The findings suggest that e-learning is an essential tool that should be more widely used to supplement the EFL "face-to-face" class. It can encourage students to seek information, evaluate it, share it collaboratively, and transform it into their own knowledge.

Shyamlee and Phil [13] studied the use of technology in English language teaching and learning and they found that technology plays a very important role. Caporarello & Sarchioni [14] have also conducted a study on e-learning: The recipe for success includes the three most important characteristics of e-learning as identified by respondents: (1) e-learning is autonomous in the learning activities, (2) It enriches the classroom experience with contents and exercises available online, and (3) It re-creates a classroom-like experience in a virtual context. As can be realized from these studies, e-learning clearly shows a lot of potential as a teaching resource.

A. The Rationale behind the Use of Parallel Reading Passage in the e-Learning

Before undertaking the study, a questionnaire was devised

to ascertain from students the problems they were most likely to encounter when reading. The results of this survey were reinforced through teacher observation. Their major problems were as follows:

- 1) Inadequate vocabulary to understand the text.
- 2) Lack of reading strategies so that they read a passage word by word from start to finish.
- 3) Attempting to aid comprehension by translating every word into Thai.
- 4) Moving a pencil, vocalizing or following the text with their fingers while reading.

All these errors reduced the capacity of students to read faster.

In this study, the researcher used a parallel reading passage in the e-learning program as a tool to supplement in-class teaching. This means that the students had already pre-learned some vocabulary items and grammatical structures from the reading passages in the classroom. The reasons for using parallel reading passages are as follows:

1. Some units of the reading passages in Authentic English Texts for Advanced Learners, a commercial text book, are parallel as in the three aspects mentioned below.

2. Reading a parallel reading passage in the e-learning is more challenging than reading the same passage. As the reading passage in the e-learning contains the same theme, main vocabulary and structures that are read in the classroom.

Although the two passages are concerned with the same theme, they contain different information. The teacher can use the parallel reading passage to stimulate the students' interests to read purposefully.

3. Reading a parallel reading passage provides the students with a chance to read, revise and familiarize themselves with the vocabulary, grammatical structures and the content of the passage. Because of this, they will get less pressure while reading the passage in the e-learning.

B. Definition of "Parallel Reading Passage"

In this study the researcher uses the term "parallel reading passage" to refer to a reading passage that shares one or more of the following aspects with the reading passage in a classroom:

1) Vocabulary

The reading passage in the e-learning content should contain some or all of the main vocabulary items, in similar context, as used in the classroom reading passage.

2) Linguistic structures

The reading passage should contain some or all of the main linguistic structures, in similar context, as used in the classroom reading passage.

3) Theme

The reading passage should have the same theme, and similar content to that of the reading passage in the classroom.

4) Background to the study

The modern class incorporating technology has an increasing number of differences from the traditional class. In traditional classroom teaching, students are taught by a teacher and students listen to the lecture, take notes, express their ideas and participate in class activities. Some students understand quicker and easier than others. However, students

are different in terms of intellectual ideas, perceptions and different learning style preferences. Some students can learn and understand quicker and easier than others. Therefore, classroom teaching is not suited to individual differences. The use of modern technology is seen as a way to serve each students' needs.

C. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer two research questions:

1. Does e-learning help to develop students' English skills better than "in-class-only" teaching?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards using parallel reading passages in the e-learning?

D. Subjects

The subjects of this study were a class of second year undergraduate English major students at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University in Thailand. These students were registered to study "English Reading" course for the second semester of the academic year 2015, which was a compulsory course. This course focused on improving students reading skills.

II. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

In this study, 90 students were given a pre-test to establish that they were of similar levels of proficiency. The scores of the pre-test were used to place the students into 2 groups of 45 members each. (See Table I) Group 1 students (the control group) studied English Reading in a classroom setting. Students in group 2 supplemented their studies using the e-learning procedure. These students had the opportunity to study anywhere and anytime.

A. Research Instruments

The research instruments in this study were the e-learning lessons, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

1) E-learning lessons

The e-learning lessons were developed especially for students studying English Reading course. There are 8 units in this e-learning program. This program provides students opportunities to read parallel reading passages as many times as they want so that they can develop their English reading skills.

2) Achievements test

At the end of the semester, the control group and the experimental group were given a post-test. Both groups were tested with the same achievements test.

3) Questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Table II) was used to find out students' attitudes towards using e-learning to supplement English Reading. The questionnaire consisted of 8 items using five-point Likert scales. The data obtained were analyzed in terms of mean scores and standard deviations as follows:

4.51 – 5.00 = Strongly agree

3.51-4.50 = Agree

2.51 -3.50 = Undecided

1.51 -2.50 = Disagree

1.00-1.50 = Strongly Disagree

4) Semi-structured interview

In order to clarify some unclear points from the questionnaire and to support ideas from other sources of data, the semi-structured interviews were also conducted. 15 students were randomly selected for interview at the end of the study programme. Students were asked for their opinions on using parallel reading passages in the e-learning program to supplement English Reading course.

TABLE I: THE RESULTS OF THE CONTROL GROUP AND THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Group	Number of Students	Mean	t-value	t-table	Level of Significance
1	45	29.7	5.625	2.33	0.01
2	45	37.8			

TABLE II: QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions	Mean	SD
1. The e-learning program is easy to use and user friendly	4.48	0.61
2. The parallel reading passages in the e-learning program help the students understand the content better.	4.50	0.51
3. The teacher should use this program to supplement in class teaching.	4.38	0.50
4. The content of this e-learning program develops students' reading skills.	4.53	0.51
5. This e-learning program motivates students to read more	4.38	0.59
6. This e-learning program facilitates and enhances students' learning experience.	4.23	0.53
7. The activities in this e-learning program activate students' language skills and increase their interaction with the language.	4.36	0.57
8. The parallel reading passages in the e-learning reduced your tension while reading	4.40	0.56

B. Findings from the Application of the Three Research Instruments

1) Findings from the test

The test was taken by both groups of students in the allocated time limit of 50 minutes. The total score of the test was 50. Group 1 (Control Group) had received no supplementary e-learning program while Group 2 (Experimental Group) had received the supplementary e-learning program. The test was measured by the number of correct answers from each group, and then the mean and standard deviation of the control and the experimental group were calculated.

The Table I shows that the total mean-values of the experimental group were higher than those of the control group. The test results showing the mean-values of the control group and the experimental group demonstrate significant differences. The t-value is 5.625 (the level of significance is 0.01 and t-table is 2.33). This is statistically significant indicating that e-learning has helped the students develop their English reading skills.

2) Findings from the questionnaire

After finding a significant increase in test results for the

experimental group, students were asked to specify their attitudes towards using the e-learning program.

As can be seen from Table II, the students had favorable attitudes towards using e-learning to supplement in-class teaching. They considered the program is easy to use and user friendly. In addition, there was a favorable response to the overall content of the e-learning programme as it was believed to help develop their reading skills. Finally, students felt that this program could motivate, facilitate, enhance their learning experience, activate and increase their interaction with the language. Moreover, it reduced students' tension while reading.

3) Findings from the semi-structured interviews

The results of the semi-structured interviews show that the students had positive attitudes towards using e-learning to supplement in-class teaching.

The following are some quotes from the students' concerning their positive attitudes towards this program:

1. What do you think about using parallel reading passages to develop students reading skills?

- 1) "I like the parallel reading passage in the e-learning program because it motivates me to read more by myself."
- 2) "I feel very relaxed while I am reading because I have some background knowledge about the content in class. This helps me read faster."
- 3) "It helps me to improve my knowledge of vocabulary and reading skills."
- 4) "Although the content of the reading passage in the classroom and the e-learning are similar, the e-learning simulates me to read more and more."
- 5) "I feel that it is interesting and make me keen to study."
- 6) "This program helps me to read better because I have some knowledge about this topic. So it is not difficult for me to read and understand the passage."
- 7) "Background knowledge from the reading class helps me understand the passage in the e-learning program easier and faster."

2. Can you identify the aspects of this program that you like?

- 1) "I like reading online because the letters can move and there are colors"
- 2) "I like this program because I can read anytime and anywhere I like so I practice reading every day. Now I spend less time in reading."
- 3) "The lessons are very interesting and I enjoy studying it."
- 4) "I like doing exercises in e-learning because I can get immediate feedback."

3. Would you like other teachers to use e-learning to supplement English classes? If so, how?

- 1) "I like the idea of using e-learning to supplement in-class teaching because it is not boring. In the past, the reading course I took was quite boring and dull. I was assigned to read an assigned textbook or the teacher's handouts."
- 2) "I want the teacher to supplement e-learning with in-class teaching because I can access it when I want it."
- 3) "E-learning program helps me improve my reading skills and I think the teacher should implement a program to improve other language skills."

4. Do you prefer reading and doing exercises from a book to e-learning ?

- 1) "I prefer reading and doing exercise by e-learning because the presentation is interesting and stimulating."
- 2) "I prefer reading and doing exercise by e-learning because I can do it better and I am not anxious anymore."
- 3) "Reading online is more interesting than reading a book."

5. Are there any other comments and suggestions about this program?

- 1) "I like reading online because I feel very relaxed."
- 2) "I am more interested in reading by my own."
- 3) "I like the program because I can access when I want it."

However, there are some drawbacks of using e-learning:

- 1) "My house did not have internet access. Many times, I had to look for an internet café. I don't want to spend money for the internet service."
- 2) "The unstable Internet connection wasted my time while I waited to be connected."
- 3) "I can't use computer because it is not connected."
- 4) "I got bored with the slow internet connection."

III. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results from the tests, the questionnaire and the interviews show that e-learning is a valuable tool that should be used to supplement classroom teaching. Students strongly believed that the e-learning program enabled them to develop their reading skills in terms of increasing their motivation, enriching their vocabulary, and promoting positive attitudes towards reading. Most students felt that this technique helped them learn in a better environment than that of their normal English class. Moreover, this program can lower students' anxiety level so that students could enjoy learning in a more relaxed atmosphere without the pressure of a classroom and peers. The only downside was that of time constraint if the computers were down or busy and waste money if they don't have computers. Technical problems of access and speed of internet need to be improved.

From the quantitative data presented above, there appear to be three key factors of using the internet influencing the ability to read and comprehend quickly.

1. Students' background and prior knowledge.

The background information about vocabulary, structure and the themes of the reading passage can help the students develop understanding and give them a chance to make predictions when they read. This signifies that learning takes place by relating the previous knowledge from reading the passage to understand the new one. As stated in Nunan [15].

"The familiarity with the content and background knowledge of the topic has an important effect on level of comprehension." This idea is supported by Rixon [16] that in English language where the students have limited experience of the language their previous knowledge, especially the knowledge of the content, is very important. When the subject matter is well known but the grasp of the language is weak, the students can work out the meaning of the language by matching what they think the passage is with what they already know.

2. Motivation.

The data from the questionnaire and the semi-structure indicated that the students have positive attitudes towards this program. E-learning motivates them to read more and it also develops their reading skills. Mc Donough [17] states "Motivation of the students is one of the most important factors influencing their success or failure in learning the language." Another factor is learners' attitude. This is because an ESL/EFL learner's motivation in language learning is affected by his/her attitudes learning the language [18].

The data from the semi-structured interview indicate that parallel reading passages facilitated the students' reading comprehension. It is flexible in terms of self-pacing learning.

3. Learner-centeredness.

In normal class in Thailand, teachers are the center of classroom activities and students are quiet, obedient and respectful. Students are expected to believe what teachers say without questioning. Thai students seem to be passive in the Western teachers' eyes. Students are reluctant to participate in oral communication because they are afraid of making mistakes, which would result in loss of face [19]. With e-learning, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. They can control the pace of their studies by themselves.

Despite some drawbacks, it is recommended to use e-learning to supplement face-to-face learning. It encourages students to study independently and spend more time engaged in the English language to improve their language proficiency. The success and value of any e-learning program cannot be appreciated from the ability to make use of technology, but rather the ability to maximize students learning effectiveness by either being able to revisit skill-building activities or increase the skills they have already attained. Moreover, online learning enhances students' autonomy by giving them to opportunity to manage their own learning.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The recommendations for further research are presented as follows:

- 1) As this study was undertaken with a reading class of Kasetsart University students, broader generalizations could be made if more universities from other settings were included in future studies.
- 2) This study does not record how often students studied with the e-learning programme or their e-learning study behavior. Further research is recommended to record students' frequency of e-learning study.
- 3) Further research needs to be conducted on how different age groups engage with e-learning, what materials/media they find interesting and useful as well as the relationship between e-learning and students' learning styles.

APPENDIX

Collection of some samples taken from e-learning lessons used in this research is shown in below pictures, including the course objective, table of contents of this course, the pre-reading activity exercise, the reading exercise, vocabulary exercise and the reading passage of unit 2 (see Fig. 1-Fig. 6).

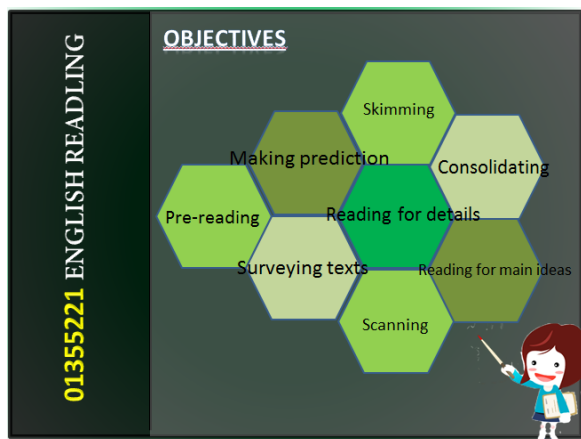


Fig. 1. Course objectives.

Fig. 5. Vocabulary exercise.

Fig. 2. Table of contents.

Fig. 6. The reading passage of unit 2.

Fig. 3. Pre-reading activity exercise.

Fig. 4. Reading exercise.

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