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RESEARCH PAPERS
Students' & Teachers' Voices
VALUES AND CULTURE
Personal Development and Growth
CIEX Symposium Summaries
Updating Language Teaching Professionals

Improving the English Listening Skill by Taking Advantage of the Available Technologies

Mejora de la habilidad auditiva en inglés aprovechando las tecnologías disponibles

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Abstract

This research explores the advantages of using Facebook as a virtual learning environment (VLE) in English language learning as well as the benefits of using different websites to develop the listening skill in the students of a public high school in the center of Mexico. The study was conducted following the procedure of quantitative research. First, by applying an experimental method and then by using a survey. In order to identify participants' listening skill level, a pre-test and a post-test were applied. In addition, a survey was conducted to determine participants' opinions. Findings demonstrate that Facebook is an excellent VLE that facilitates the process of teaching and learning English. They also identified that YouTube is an effective and interesting website to increase students' listening skill and movie maker videos is an appropriate technological resource to monitor students' progress.

Key words:

Technology, virtual environments, English learning, listening skill

Resumen

Este estudio explora las ventajas de utilizar los ambientes de aprendizaje virtual en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del idioma inglés. Asimismo, explora los beneficios de utilizar diferentes páginas web para desarrollar la habilidad auditiva en los estudiantes de una preparatoria publica en el centro de México. Esta investigación fue realizada siguiendo los principios de la investigación mixta, utilizando un experimento y una encuesta. Con el fin de poder identificar el nivel de comprensión auditiva de los participantes, una prueba preliminar y una prueba final fueron aplicadas. Asimismo, una encuesta fue realizada para conocer las opiniones de los estudiantes. Los resultados revelan que Facebook es una excelente herramienta para facilitar el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras. De igual forma, se identificó que YouTube es una herramienta de interés para los estudiantes de preparatoria el cual promueve el desarrollo de la habilidad auditiva.

Palabras clave: Tecnología, entornos virtuales, enseñanza de inglés, habilidad auditiva

Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language to youngsters is synonymous with caring for their own interests and preferences. Technology is one of those preferences. Because of this reason, English language teachers should embrace the new language learning technologies and integrate them into a new pedagogy inside and outside the classroom. It has been identified that Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), distance learning, social network, and language games bring various benefits to the language learning process (Blake, 2013). Sharma and Barett (2007) listed several reasons to use technology inside and outside the classroom when a foreign language is learned. Among the most important is exposure to the target language, instant feedback, time-saving, and they find it very motivating.

This study was conducted in a public high school in the center of Mexico. This high school offers specialties to develop a job in different areas. The English Language curriculum of this high school is three hours the first and second levels and five hours per week for the third level. We have to mention that none of the rooms used in this high school are provided with technology.

The purpose of this research was to explore the benefits of using virtual learning environments to develop students' listening skills and finding appropriate creating tools to improve these skills. In this way, we can examine not just virtual learning environments but also, we can create tools to develop the listening skill.

The present study established the following research questions:
- What are the benefits of a virtual learning environment in English language learning?
- What are the most appropriate web sources to improve the English listening skills?
- What is the correlation between the use of virtual learning environments and the development of the listening skills?

Based on the previous research questions, the study aims to identify the most appropriate web sources to improve the listening skill, to explore the benefits of virtual learning environment in English language learning and to determine the benefits of virtual learning environment in English language learning.

The benefits of conducting this research are several. Among the most important are that the students would find proper solutions when they do not develop their listening skills inside the classroom. It can give them ideas to use the technology properly to improve their listening skills. Also, to help them to keep practicing in a foreign language classroom and even beyond the classroom.

Theoretical framework

English language teachers play an important role in teaching the listening skill inside and outside the classroom. Most of them struggle to expose students to a range of listening experiences such as making listening purposeful for the students, helping them understand what listening entails and how they might approach it and building up students´ confidence in their own listening ability (Underwood, 1989, p.21).

Students need to work by themselves to get a better self-directed learning, but the teacher needs to be a guide in the process teaching- learning. According to Scrimshaw (1997), there is a choice to make when teachers consider how each individual should relate to other class members. There are some elements to consider creating a pre- computer classroom:

Something that we need to take into account when there is no interaction among the students and the teacher is the use of electronic mail for messages, participation in chats and the use of computer managed learning application for test generation.

It is crucial to facilitate all the information to the students to ease the learning process. If the designing of

material or information is not appropriated for students, they will become frustrated and they can lose interest in using the Internet as a source to learn a foreign language.

According to Erber, Ban, and Castañeda (2009), a virtual learning environment is a web space that facilitates the interaction between the student and the teacher. It is generally designed by the teacher to support the course and both students and teachers can discuss, interact and share information.

This virtual learning environment should be only used by the student and the teacher. The general purpose is that both students and teachers can access to this information and they can share their material with more confidence and security.

Virtual learning environments are either a platform to support teachers in the management of online educational courses or web spaces that permit teachers to organize their work as their students' work electronically.

The components that include a virtual learning environment are:
- Communication between tutors and students: E-mails, chats, discussion board's facilities, which will help students and teachers in various types of communication, one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many.
- Self-assessment and summative assessment. This includes multiple choice assessment with immediate feedback.
- Delivery of learning resources and materials. Both teachers and students can get and support materials, images and video- clips, link to other web resources, online discussions and assessment activities.
- Shared work group areas. It allows students and teachers to upload and share files as well as communicate with each other.
- Support for students. Students can ask for help when they need support.
- Management and tracking of students. Students are protected, teachers and students can only access to the course; in addition, students can only see and get the material. Generally, they need usernames and a password.
- Student tools. Individual student webpages, *drop boxes* for the upload of coursework, electronic diaries and calendars.
- Consistent and customizable look and feel. The virtual learning environment needs to be easy to use by the student and by the teacher. It can be individualized with colors, graphics and logos, but the essential mode of the use remains constant.
- Navigation structure. Information should be supported by a standard navigation toolbar. Most virtual learning environment software assume that students will work their way through linear sequences of instructional sequences. (O´ Leary & Ramsden, n.d.).

A virtual learning environment is safe, secure and it is generally online and accessible. The purposes of using a virtual learning environment are clear, to facilitate communication among teachers and students.

There are different purposes for virtual learning environments. Firstly, teachers can use their time to write, support, upload documents or simply share information to practice their students´ learning. Secondly, students can post their ideas or opinions on the discussion forums. Finally, students can post homework instead of handing in a document to the teacher or sharing the work with their classmates (Erben et al. 2009).

The advantages of using virtual learning environments are communication, which has an infinite number of channels in the format of forums, discussion threads, polls and surveys.

Another view of the virtual learning environment is the one provided by Sheha and Nagaraja (2013). For them, it is a system for transferring learning materials to students by means of the web. There are different kinds of virtual learning environments that can be used by students or teachers. Primarily, off the shelf, this is a term for commercial items available in the commercial marketplace that can be bought and used under government contract. For example, Blackboard or WebCT. Second, open-source which often free to use and adapt whereas

support is charged. For instance, Moodle. Lastly, bespoke, which is developed by institutions for their own individual needs.

Most high school students know and use Facebook. The majority of them enter this online social networking service once a day. They share information, upload pictures and write about their lives.

Facebook, Inc. is a social networking company. The company is engaged in developing products that enable users to connect and share through mobile devices and personal computers. It offers various services focused on people, marketers, and developers. It offers various platforms for people to share their opinions, ideas, photos, and videos, and to engage in other activities.

Social networking can encourage students to collaborate with others and participate in experimental learning experiences. Social networking services can help students to be engaged in academic and social English while outside of the classroom environment (Brozeck & Duckworth, 2011).

Developing the listening skill through Virtual Learning Environments

Wellter (2007) states that when a virtual learning environment is named, it implies that learning through such an environment is a poor relation to any learning that takes place in a face-to-face setting.

A teaching through a virtual learning environment refers to the components in which learners and tutors participate in "on-line" interactions of various kinds, including on-line learning. The purpose of any virtual learning environment then, is to facilitate e-learning.

Similarly, the US-based Learning Circuits magazine defines it as 'a wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN), audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV, CD-ROM, and more.

There are two kinds of listening when we learn a foreign language. Firstly, extensive listening, which Harmer (2007) states "will usually take place outside the classroom: in the students´ home, car or on personal MP3 players as they travel from one place to another" (p.303). This kind of listening will be chosen by the student. Generally, students like to listen to music or watch some videos in English. They use technology to satisfy their pleasures. They download music and podcasts, watch videos or film on YouTube. The best thing about extensive listening is that students can listen to again events or videos. On the other hand, intensive listening is the material that the teacher uses to practice listening skills inside the classroom. Besides this kind of material, the teacher can use live listening, which can take the following forms: reading aloud, storytelling, interviews, and conversations (Harmer, 2007).

Techniques to teach listening through technology

Technology has changed the way we learn a foreign language. Recently, students want to learn more through video games, videos, songs or any resource from the Internet. Here there are some examples of how students can work their listening through technology.

According to Burt (1999), videos can be used in different settings. Videos combine visual and audio stimuli. It allows learners to see facial expressions and body language. Videos can be stimulating for adult young learners. In addition, they can provide real language and cultural information.

Regarding authentic videos, they present the real language, and it is not simplified and is spoken at a normal speed. These videos include movies, television programs, and news broadcasts. It is important to use them in order to provide the real language to students.

Methodology

The overall research approach that frames this work is a quantitative method. Firstly, an experimental research with a group was carried out. After that a survey research was conducted in order to collect data regarding students´ attitudes and reactions towards using Facebook and the different web sites.

The participants in this study were 28 second grade high school students (15 females and 13 males) with ages ranging from 16-18 years old. All of them were enrolled in a basic English course. Their classes were held two days per week: Tuesday and Friday. Each class lasted one hour, except on Friday where classes lasted 100 minutes.

The research instruments used in this research were a pre-test, a post-test and survey. The tests were designed in order to determine the students´ English level regarding the listening skill and make a comparison between the results they got at the beginning of the course and at the end of it. Either the pre-test or the post-test consisted of watching a video and answering eight questions. On the other hand, the survey was designed in order to collect students' opinions about the effectiveness of the different websites and Facebook.

It is important to mention that in order to carry out the study, an English language course was designed. This course lasted three weeks. The Social network (Facebook) was used as a virtual learning environment. It helped students and teachers to communicate among them and to share documents and resources from Internet. In addition, the researchers utilized the following websites from Internet to improve their listening skills:

"Youtube", which is an application in which students had the opportunity to see videos and practice their listening. Students have to write the transcript and translate it into Spanish after listening it. Students have to work with at least three videos each week to improve their pronunciation and listening skills.

"Fairy Tales & Stories for Children". This is a web source that has easy and elementary stories with audio and transcript.

"100 English Easy Conversations", which are elementary conversations with subtitles to help students to develop their listening skills.

It is important to mention that the student's book and a workbook were used as main learning resources and all the assignments were linked to them. In addition, all the listening activities performed by the students were carried out inside the classroom.

Subsequently, the researchers designed lesson plans for the next three weeks. In the first class, the students had to watch a video from Headway Beginner's student's book. Afterwards, the researchers applied a test to students to evaluate their listening comprehension. Three weeks later, the students watched another video from Headway Beginner´s book. In the last class, students also completed the survey in order to evaluate their final performance of the listening comprehension skill. This also helped to identify their attitudes and reactions towards using a Virtual Learning Environment (Facebook) to improve listening skills.

Findings and discussion

This section displays the results obtained from the experimental and survey groups' research regarding the use of the virtual learning environment (Facebook) to improve English listening in high school students. First, the research questions that are associated with this study are restated. Second, research displays the results found from the three data collectors used in this research. Research results depict the listening opportunities through Facebook and also provide an analysis of the results from both, the experimental and control groups. It also compares the listening averages of both groups. Finally, the researcher examines the results of the survey

applied to both groups.

Research questions:
What are the most appropriate web sources to improve the English listening skills?
What are the benefits of virtual learning environment in English language learning?
What is the correlation between the use of virtual learning environments and the development of the listening skills?

As described above, in order to answer the research questions, researchers utilized three different data collectors: a listening pre-test evaluation, a listening post-test evaluation and a survey.

The results have provided evidence that the websites suggested by the researchers were useful to make participants practice their listening skill. The information displayed in the graph below shows that the course offered to the participants served to improve the listening skill. As it can be observed at the beginning of the course, just 40% of the participants obtained excellent or good scores in the pre-test. However, in the post-test the 75% of students who obtained excellent or good scores increased. For example, in the pre-test only one participant obtained all the items correct meanwhile in the post-test the number of students who obtained all the correct answer increased exponentially. In the same way, in the first test only two participants answered seven questions correctly whereas in the post-test nine participants achieved the same score. Based on these numbers, it can be said that Facebook and the online resources provided in this course were worthy to improve students' listening skill.

Regarding the second phase of this study, all the participants perceived that through the different tasks and tools applied in the course they could improve their listening skill.

Another important finding was that all the participants considered that Facebook is an appropriate technological tool to have a better communication among teacher and students.
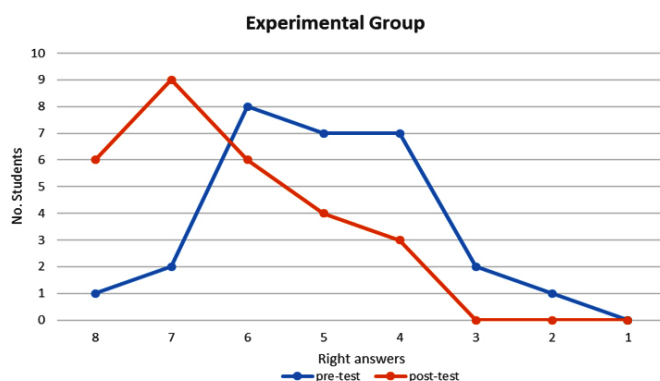
Results of the pre-test and post test

In reference to the statement that the web source Movie Maker Videos uploaded on YouTube is an appropriate or creating a tool to evaluate your listening skills, 25 students agreed with this statement. 21 participants strongly agreed and agreed with this statement, 5 participants were undecided and 2 disagreed with this statement. These results demonstrated that regardless of the way in which the assignments were given through Facebook, students showed a positive attitude towards this web source. Seeing that most of the students from the experimental group strongly agreed and agreed with this statement, it could be said that Movie Maker Videos through YouTube could be considered as an appropriate creating tool to evaluate students' listening.

Concerning the statement, you think your listening has improved, almost all the participants in the experimental group agreed with this statement. 26 students agreed that they improved their listening.

Regarding the statement Facebook is an appropriated technological tool to have a better communication among teacher and students, the results reflected that the majority of participants in the experimental group agreed with this statement. In addition, it shows that just a few students disagreed with this statement.

The statement Facebook is an appropriate technological tool to share videos, audios, and podcasts to learn a foreign language, the majority in the experimental group agreed with this statement. In addition, two students showed disagreement with this statement. Seeing that most of the students from the experimental group strongly agreed and agreed with this statement, it could be said that Facebook could be considered as a VLE to improve students' listening.

Conclusions and recommendations

This final section presents the conclusion and the recommendations of the research. This begins with the answers to the research questions related to this investigation. As mentioned above, the research questions established in the first section were the following:
What are the most appropriate web sources to improve the English listening skills?
What are the benefits of virtual learning environment in English language learning?
What is the correlation between the use of virtual learning environments and the development of the listening skills?

After working with the listening exercises on a virtual learning environment, participants from the experimental group found that the most meaningful web source to deal with their listening skill is YouTube. They suggested that the teacher or guide needs to find appropriate videos to help students to develop their listening skills. On the other hand, students can get frustrated. The video needs to be short, clear, interesting and the most important part, it should match the instructional goals.

They also mentioned that Movie Maker videos is an appropriate creating tool to evaluate students' listening skills according to the results from the experimental group.

Results confirmed that Facebook is an appropriate web source to improve their English and their listening skills. Facebook serves a VLE to share videos, podcasts and documents. It also helps students to improve their listening skills because they obtain instant feedback and they are exposed to the target language, it is interesting for them and it is time saving. Based on participants' answers it can be said that nowadays technology is an essential tool to help students to grow with their knowledge, but it has to be easy to use and helpful. On the other hand, it can stop students' learning and progress. The teacher becomes a monitor and mentor, for this reason a teacher needs to collaborate with the use of technology outside the classroom.

Results obtained through the two tests demonstrated that there is a close correlation between the use of virtual learning environments, in this case Facebook, and the development of the listening skills. It is based on the number of students who obtained better results in the post-test.

Implications of the study

This research helps both teachers and students. Nowadays, education demands more learning through technology. Facebook as a VLE is a good resource to help students and teachers to have a better communication. In the future, learning a foreign language will demand blending learning as a result of the globalization and it is where Virtual Learning Environments will take place.

Limitations of the study

This research had some limitations. First of all, some students could not see the videos on YouTube that the researchers uploaded due to copyright that this technological tool had. Another limitation that the study had was that some students did not enjoy listening to the assignments on Facebook, and some did copy the assignments with their classmates and there was not a progress in their listening comprehension.

Suggestions for further research

In order to gain a better idea about how to use a VLE in a foreign language class, researchers should consider the limitations of this study. Consequently, researchers should know how to use technology properly to have a good use of technological tools and web sources. Furthermore, as this research only presented the use of Facebook to improve listening skills, researchers should also consider investigate the use of Facebook as a VLE to improve other skills.

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  a) **Introduction:** This section describes the context where the research was carried out, reason why the topic was selected, importance of the study, reason why the research was carried out.
  b) **Purpose:** Here the writer states and explains the research objectives, intentions, questions or hypothesis.
  c) **Research method:** In this part, the author mentions and justifies the research method that was selected, describes briefly the subjects, the context and the research procedures, as well as the instruments that were used for the data and information collection.
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  e) **Conclusion:** This section suggests the importance of the findings, considering the contribution to the theory, the research area and professional practice and suggest practical uses as well as possible applications for further research.

3. Body of the article:
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  a) **Introduction:** Present the research topic area, studied theme, and the research study, mentioning if it is: descriptive, explanatory, evaluative, correlational, interpretative, ethnographic, etc. Also, emphasize the research problem or topic.
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- Spaces: 1.5
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