All On Screen: *The Effects of Digitized Learning Activities on Increasing Learner Interest and Engagement in EFL Classroom*

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Abstract
With digital natives as learners, today's EFL classroom has become a challenging field for teachers to design a lesson which will effectively capture and maintain learner attention and engagement. This study attempts to elaborate a technology-based learning environment in order to increase learner interest and deeply engage them in classroom activities. "All On Screen" scheme is developed by transforming paper-based exercises into interactive digitized learning activities (DLA). On-screen drills and game-based practices created on digital platforms are used as tools to trigger learner intrinsic motivation which eventually leads to increasing interest and learning engagement. The study examines an English classroom of first year undergraduate students at the researcher's faculty, in perspective of (1) the effects of DLA on students classroom behaviours -- to what extent DLA can retain learner attention throughout the whole lesson, (2) students perception of DLA -- how DLA increase learner interest and engagement in classroom, and (3) students academic performance -- to what extent DLA can enhance learner language learning. The result of the study reveals positive reactions from learners: increasing interest, longer attention span, and higher level of participation and engagement. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the implementation of digitized learning activities will be more effective in terms of improving learner language learning when enhanced and well-balanced with teacher's scaffolding strategies. This implementation could be a considerable strategy for EFL classroom design.

Keywords: ELT, EFL, digital learners, digital natives, learner interest, learner engagement, digitized learning activities, technology-based classroom

Introduction

"You can't spell TEACH without T-E-C-H!"

-- Kevin Jarrett --

(International Society for Technology in Education, 2008)

Forget about the time when we were in classroom and the teacher, before starting the class, told us to turn off our mobile phone for that the ringing or beeping sound would not interrupt the ongoing class. In this Digital Age, mobile phone, instead of being a distractor, has turned into a learning device where students can look up for the information they need right at the instant their doubt arises. They do not need the teacher's revelation of the meaning of the words anymore when they can google search it right away.

In today's language classroom, media and technologies are powerful tools which cannot be neglected when the classroom involves young learners in this age who are all digital natives, or in another words, the "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet (Prensky, 2001). Teachers of the 21st Century therefore have to embrace the changes. Teaching must be transformed to better meet the needs of a digital learner (Prensky, 2005).

Embedding information technology (IT) in language classroom is not new. English language teachers around the world have been using media in their classroom for decades. As well as researchers continue their study on investigating the effects of implementing IT in EFL classroom in every aspect. Thailand in particular has embraced technology-assisted learning since its kick starter, as evidenced by the ICT Master Plan (2009-2013) announced by Thailand Ministry of Information and Communication Technology in 2009 to promote the e-Education framework. Technology has been proved to support interactive and collaborative learning (Richards, 2006; Voogt & Plomp, 2010). Therefore, implementing technology in learning is considerably essential for today's classroom.

In case of Prince of Songkla University International College (PSUIC), new students are recruited into the program from various admission channels. The diversity of the students ranges from their interests, their background knowledge, their expectation towards the program, to various other aspects including their English proficiency level, which is one of the most crucial factors affecting students learning performance. Every year there are numbers of students whose English proficiency is quite low (CEFR A2-A2+). The problem of this group of students is that they have to learn all courses in English, while their English proficiency is insufficient to execute it.

it is discovered that the true cause which hinders student development in English learning is rooted in student attitude toward language learning due to their past experiences, their interest and also their motivation to learn. As a consequence, students with language challenges suffer in understanding other courses content and find it is difficult to improve their English skills because they have to learn English in English which makes things more complicated when it comes to technical terms or grammar explanation. This results in a demotivational effect on student's learning interest and engagement in class. The mentioned effect can clearly be seen through

students' classroom behaviors like when they avoid teacher's eye contact, do not volunteer or hesitate to express themselves, or even end up missing classes.

With the purpose to cope with the aforementioned problem, the researcher attempts to design a constructive sequence of lesson and create a motivational classroom atmosphere by implementing digitized learning activities (DLA) to trigger students learning motivation and maintain their concentration throughout the whole class session. The study examines the effects of DLA on increasing students interest and engagement through an analysis of students' perception of DLA and their classroom behaviors, including whether DLA can enhance students' academic performance.

Methodology

This study was carried out in two consecutive English courses for first year students in an international program throughout two semesters (15 weeks per semester) at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus, in Thailand. The two courses were taught by the same teacher. The content of both courses followed the scope and sequence of a selected course book, but the delivery methods were designed differently. The data were collected through two sources: teacher's observation on student's classroom behaviors and an insight interview with each individual on their learning experiences and perception towards the introduction of technology in classroom.

Participants

The participants in this study are Thai, both male and female, first year undergraduate students (N=15) whose English proficiency is lower than TOEIC 450 or IELTS 4.5 which is considered A2-A2+, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR). They can use simple English language in communication. Mostly they are good at listening but not productive skills. CEFR has provided the description of A2 level users as follows:

A2 (Basic User)
Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.1

All of the participants are in Digital Media program. Their interests always concern technology and media development. Therefore, of all the learners in this digital age, Digital Media students are very tech-savvy, keen on games and programming. Their everyday lives and classes always involve computer-assisted learning, electronic gadgets and technology.

[1] University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, Using the CEFR: Principles of Good Practice, October 2011: 7-9.

Classroom Design

In the first semester, classroom activities were based on worksheets, role plays and tasks without technology assistance, except classroom audio and visual media like videos. The teaching strategy relied on the teacher as a facilitator and discussion leader. On the other hand, in the second semester the 'All On Screen' model was implemented with the idea of using media after media to extend the interactive atmosphere and retain students interest and engagement. Digitized Learning Activities (DLA) were introduced instead of worksheets on the purpose to change students' perception of 'more exercises' into 'interactive tasks'. However, DLA were applied on biweekly basis in order to avoid the overuse of the tools (See Figure 1).

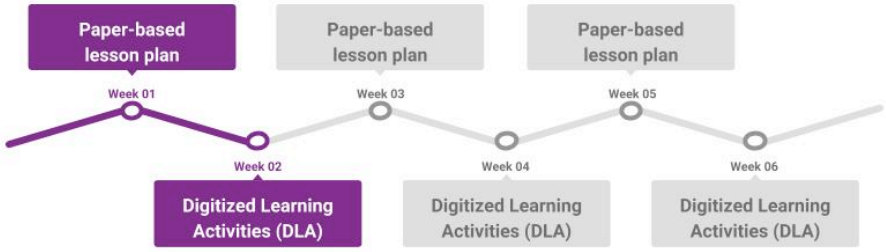


Figure 1:Digitized Learning Activities implementation on biweekly basis.

In both semester, unlike language classes in general which are organized twice a week (2 hours' lecture and 2 hours' practice on different day), the studied class was arranged only once a week and extended to 4 hours long with 10-15 minutes break at half of the whole session. This purposeful long hour was aimed for allowing a huge scenario for students to get tired or distracted, and also expanding the time for teacher's observation on the effectiveness of DLA tools. The structure of the classes was designed as an interval session of teacher's teaching and practice time. On the controlled week, the DLA tools are implemented in the sessions where practices are. The division of the 4 hours class is as demonstrated in Figure 2.

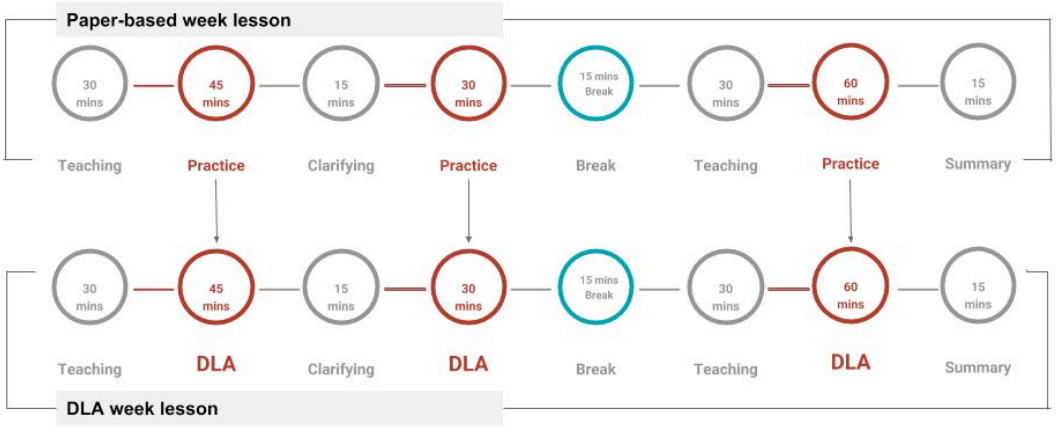


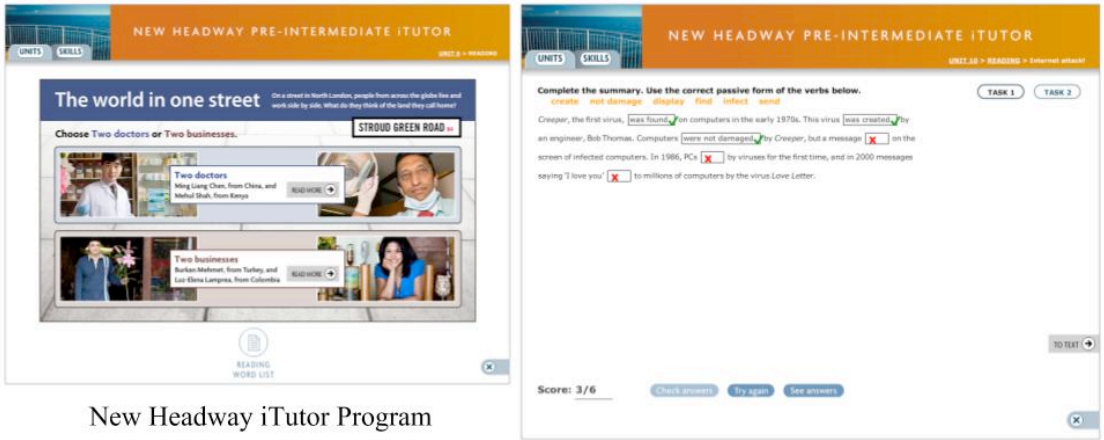
Figure 2: Digitized Learning Activities in replacement for paper-based practices.

The 4-hour session combines both teaching and practice together. The practice tasks occupy longer session than the teaching as to reduce teacher talking and expand students' engagement time. The duration of time students exposed to the paper-based exercises is controlled to be the same as the DLA exposure to avoid invalid results.

DLA Tools

In general, DLA refer to any types of learning activities facilitated by technology, basically operated on digital platform such as on internet, mobile application, social network, online educational quizzes or games, etc. For this study, the researcher exploits different types of DLA like multimedia, audio-visual reading, but the two main tools were on-screen drills and game-based practices on online platform.

On-screen drills are worksheets or paper-based exercises which have been 'digitized'; they were recreated on digital format, transformed to be displayed on screen. This is meant for the students to gain the sense of doing the practice as a whole class, not individual worksheet. On-screen drills are expected to help in enhancing students' discussion as a whole class and diverting students' perception of 'exercises' to 'whole class tasks'. On-screen drills in this study were both created by the researcher and adapted from the course books iTutor program2. The characteristics of the on-screen drills appear basically like worksheet exercises, but appearing on projector screen and assisted with sound and animation effects when inserting the correct or wrong answers. Figure 3 is the example of on-screen drills adapted from the iTutor program of New Headway Pre-Intermediate Student's Book, Oxford University Press.



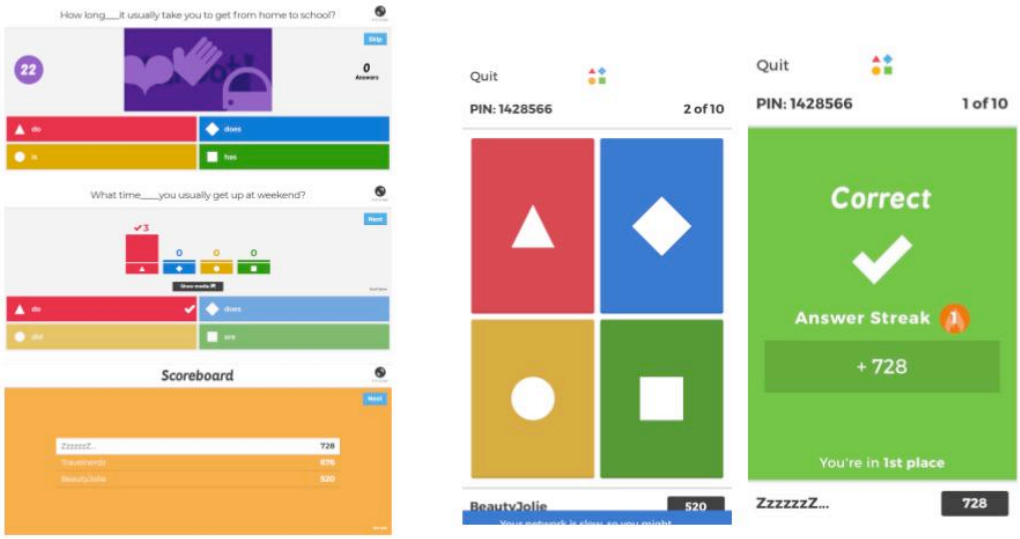
New Headway iTutor Program

Figure 3: On-screen drills adapted from the selected course book resources.

Game-based practice is designed to higher up the level of classroom interaction. Exercises and quizzes were turned into challenging quizzes on free online educational platform like Kahoot! (www.kahoot.com) and Socrative (www.socrative.com) . These websites allow teachers to create their own interactive and entertaining, yet constructive quizzes and games for students to challenge themselves against the clock and their peers. When playing, the drills or questions will be displayed on projector screen for the whole class to see. Students, using the Kahoot application on their

[2] Soars, J. & Soars, L. (2015) New Headway Pre-Intermediate Student's Book. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

mobile phone, will get an access code to join the game. The teacher will control the games pace and normally each question is time-controlled. The quizzes can be played in both individual and team mode. After each question, students will receive an instant feedback which is the answer to the question, so they know what to improve in the next question to come. The score will be displayed after each question as well, so the students can see the ranking, who have got the score and who is the fattest to answer. By this means, there are opportunities for students to practice the skills or content learned in classroom, correct themselves when making wrong answers, and have fun while learning both individually and through team discussion. Figure 4 demonstrates game-based quizzes created by the researcher on Kahoot.com.



Screen display on class projector (Teacher's control)

Student's mobile screen while playing

Figure 4: Screen captures of quizzes created as DLA on online platforms.

The ideology in creating these digitized learning activities is the idea of speaking the same language with the learners. Since the audience of the class are all digital natives, they are familiar with technology-assisted tools, the method to communicate with them effectively is to communicate in the same channel to tune our mutual interests. DLA tools are designed for students to feel familiar and comfortable in their physiological routine contexts like using mobile phones, sliding and touching the screen and being embraced in multimedia.

Results

Teacher's observation

Based on teacher's observation on students' classroom behavior, DLA have changed students' behavior in a positive way. First of all, students were more attentive and focused when DLA were introduced. They were more engaged in on-screen drills that everyone participated. There were times that students who always sat in the back row of the class moved to the front row to help their peers solve the problems. Second, discussion came natural. When they were really engaged in the tasks and were really motivated to solve the problem, they asked for their friends to brainstorm and discuss without necessity of teacher encouragement. The discussion leaders have shifted from the teacher to students themselves. It is observed that passive learners who were quite

shy and quiet in classroom showed signs of learning from their peers' discussion over the problem. Instead of ignoring what was going on in class, passive learners turned to listen to what their friends were discussing, nodding their head for understanding, comparing the suggested answers with their own ideas, sometimes murmuring what they thought was the correct answer. It is obvious that they are still shy to speak out, but they learned. When the teacher revealed the correct answer, the whole class would continue the discussion for more clarification. This brightened up the class atmosphere to be more collaborative and constructive. Third, when Kahoot and Socrative were introduced, students showed eagerness to play. Even if the quizzes were simply questions about grammatical features or normal exercises, they were still active to play. Online game-based practices have drawn attention and retain students interest and engagement the best.

Insight Interview

From the insight interview with each individual, firstly, students were asked to compare their learning experience between the two semester, the classroom with and without the presence of technology. 100% of the students preferred the presence of technology. Some of them find using technology in classroom more interesting and attractive to learn. Some of them feel that technology-based classroom is more modern. Some of them feel it is easy to do the tasks since it is their familiar behavior to use mobile phone, sliding and tapping on the screen.

Then, students were asked to rank which DLA tools they find interesting and engaging them in the activities the most. They were asked to rank all the tools used throughout both semester: worksheet, multimedia, audio-visual reading, game-based practice and on-screen drills. The result came as expected; the online game-based practice was the most popular one. However, it was followed by the multimedia in the second place, the audio-visual reading in the third place, on-screen drills in the fourth place and lastly the worksheet. The percentage of the students ranking of each learning activity is demonstrated in the following Figure 5.

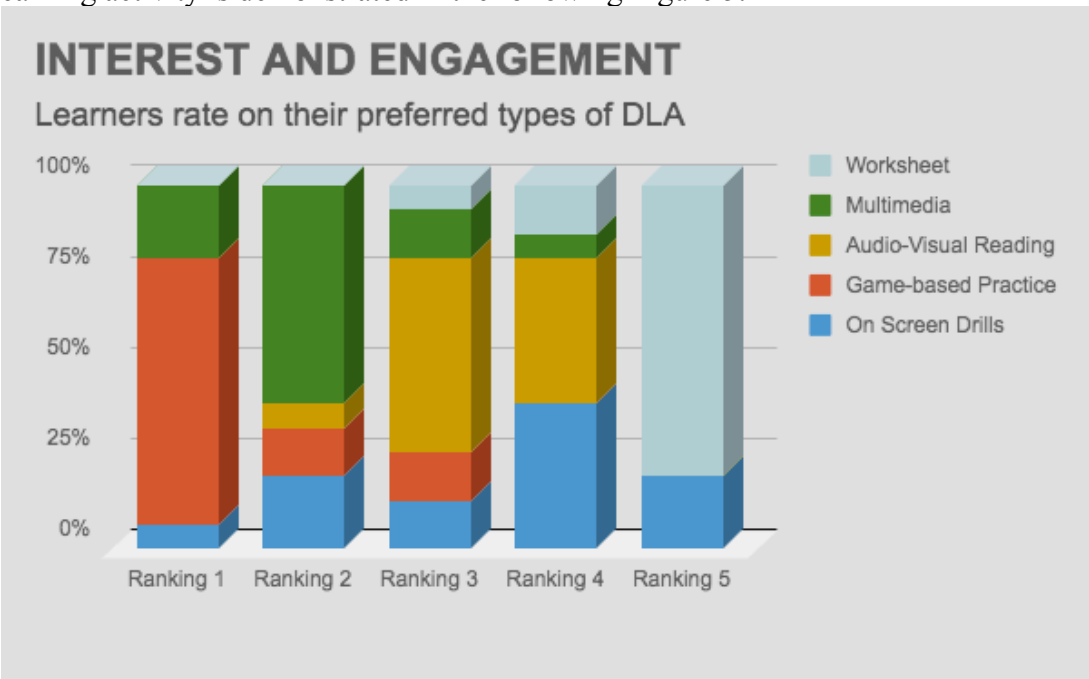


Figure 5: Students ranking of their favorite learning activities

From the revealed result, students have given an interesting comment that game-based practices were really enjoyable and could really raise their interest and engagement, even if they knew well that all the quizzes were basically exercises, but when it comes in form of challenges, it intrigues them to participate and learn. On-screen drills were ranked in the first and second place by some of the students, but not the majority of them. Those who preferred this tools have commented that on-screen drills were fun and constructive, they can do the tasks with the whole class which make them feel less stress. There was no pressure as they usually feel when doing the paper-based exercises.

In order to assess their learning performance, students were also asked to rank the tools from which they could learn the most. The result is as shown in the following Figure 6.

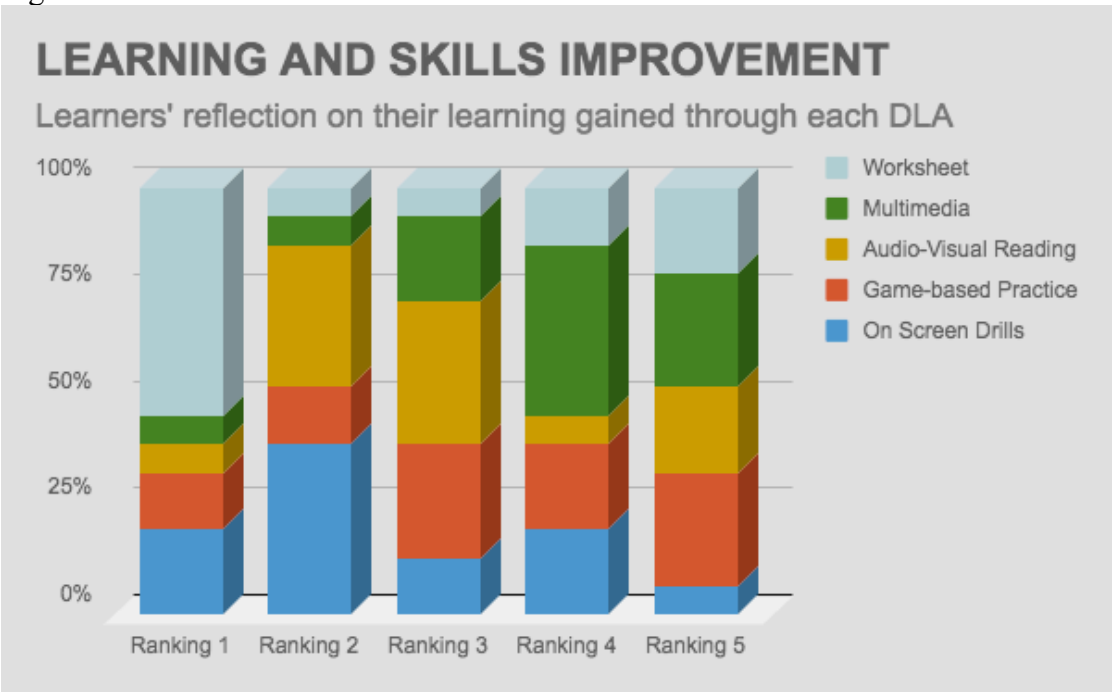


Figure 6: Students ranking of the most effective tools in terms of learning

Surprisingly, the result revealed that more than 50% of the students admitted that they can learn the best when they study on their worksheets. They still preferred to jot down the knowledge while they are learning, which on-screen drills or game-based practices could not allow them to do so. In the learning improvement aspect, on-screen drills rank the second as same as the audio-visual reading. Students have commented that on-screen drills really enriched the discussion and knowledge sharing. They could compare different ideas. It was like a debate of different thoughts and perspectives, so they really enjoyed it. Another interesting result was the game-based practice that came last in the ranking. The students most favorite tools did not enhance much of their learning because they were really into competing and excitement that they would not memorize what they had learned from the games. Some of the weak students who did not learn much from games mentioned that sometimes that wanted to take time thinking about the questions, but their friends were faster and they answered the questions without any discussion, so they could not get to really learn. This annoyed them quite a lot. They prefer to play in individual mode.

Conclusion

As the result of the study has shown, the DLA tools succeeded in increasing learner interest and engagement in classroom. However, in terms of learning, students still need the traditional way of taking notes and having some materials for revision at home. It is obvious that students know well that traditional worksheets are best for their learning, but in their perception, they are not quite welcome in classroom. From all the reflections, it can be concluded that even digital learners find a well-balanced between technology and traditional learning, enhanced with teaching techniques improve their learning the best. Therefore, for more effective implementation of technology, a blended learning model could be a considerable way to increase and maintain learner interest and engagement while also enhancing their learning performance.

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