Learning Experiences of Online English Learning With Pedagogical Redesign for Complementing Formal Face-to-Face Learning

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Abstract

The use of online learning in education has increased rapidly during the pandemic. Both teachers and students are more familiarized with technologies in online teaching and learning. With the readiness of technology, some educational institutes started adopting more blended learning after the resumption of face-to-face learning. However, some institutes consider the online mode as a direct replacement of face-to-face mode. Without thoughtful redesign of pedagogy, the effectiveness of teaching and learning was affected. Educators believe teaching and learning would be impacted by thoughtful redesign of blended learning. This research took place in a school that provided online English learning with pedagogical redesign for the purpose of complementing the formal school's face-to-face learning. Individual interviews were conducted to collect learning experiences and thematic analysis was adopted for analysing the results. The results show learning experiences were enhanced via appropriate redesign of interaction, learning activities, and assessments. The students were highly motivated in the online learning environment and they enjoyed the learning content and learning activities. Learning experiences and effectiveness were both enhanced. This study result affirms positive impacts from the redesign of pedagogy in online English learning for complementing formal face-to-face learning.

Keywords: Online Learning, Pedagogical Design, Instructional Design, Complementing Face-to-Face, Golden Triangle of Learning Engagement, Learning Motivation, Learning Engagement, Learning Experiences, Protostar Education.

1. Introduction

The unexpected suspension of classes in the schools during the pandemic changed the way the students learned. The emergency shift of learning from face-to-face mode to online mode led to problems in teaching and learning. With the sudden change, the instructors were prevented from undertaking the careful design process required for high-quality online learning (Branch & Dousay, 2015). Without the redesign of teaching and learning of the students from the classroom to the online environment, the students were found less motivated to learn (Masda Surti & Ramot, 2021).

When shifting classroom learning to online learning, the learning instruction and activities should be redesigned (Webster & Murphy, 2008). Chuah (2006) conducted a case study on a redesigned face-to-face course to build in the component of an online learning experience and showed the pedagogical approaches could help when moving teaching and learning online with the redesign of instructional materials, assessment, and presentation and support. With appropriate redesign of the course, both learning engagement and learning motivation could be improved (Theodosiou & Corbin, 2020 and (Masda Surti & Ramot, 2021).

In online learning, synchronous features are important as they enhance the flexibility and convenience of the courses (Mason & Rennie, 2006). In addition to the change during the synchronous online classes, Lam (2014) suggested that preparation before classes and reinforcement and assessment after classes are also crucial. As a result, when redesigning the course to complement face-to-face learning with online learning, a pedagogical perspective of online learning that includes instructional design, learner-centred learning, interactive learning content, and assessment, should be considered (Lam, 2014).

2. The Research

During the design and development of online English learning courses for youth and children, Protostar Education, based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and local school standards, redesigned the curriculum and instruction to maximise teaching and learning effectiveness in online English learning. The school proposed and adopted a framework of "Effective Exposure Time" (EET), which is defined under the social learning theory as exposure time in formal and informal learning environments to learn English as a Foreign Learning (EFL) from others who are more knowledgeable in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)" (Chen, 2018). Under the EET framework, the school further designed the RITA model to include the learning activities of "Raise questions" (R), "Interaction" (I), "Task extension" (T), and Assessment (A) for effective teaching and learning. As of 2022, Protostar Education has provided more than 100,000 live classes to students in Asia and Pacific regions which include Shanghai, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, Macao, Japan, Singapore, and Thailand. To understand the learning experiences of the students, Protostar Education has conducted research with the students in a secondary school in Hong Kong.

The aim of the research is to understand the learning experiences of the students taking the online course with pedagogical redesign for complementing formal face-to-face learning. Among all of the online English learning students, four students who had learnt in Protostar Education for more than one year were chosen to be studied. The students were from the same local school in Hong Kong. Consents for conducting the research were obtained from both the local school and the parents. The parents of the selected students, who decided to join the course and observed how the students learnt in the course, were interviewed

individually in a semi-structured way. Questions were asked based on an interview guide prepared with 16 questions in 5 categories. These categories included questions about the students' learning, students' engagement, teachers' engagement, difficulties in online learning, and expectations in online learning. After conducting the interviews in mid-2022, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used for data analysis of this research.

3. Analysis and Findings

In the thematic analysis, the initial thematic map, developed thematic map, and final thematic map were developed (Braun and Wilkinson, 2003). The final thematic map with 7 themes and 40 sub-themes were identified. The 7 themes and the major sub-themes will be discussed below. The students are represented in Student A, B, C and D. The frequencies of the sub-themes recorded are marked in the brackets after the sub-themes.

Theme 1: Students Engaged in Online Learning

All the students engaged in online learning as they are with sub-themes "happy (5), liked (3), enjoyed (3), actively (6), willing to speak (4), understood (1), helped (3) interaction (4), confident (3) and engaged (1)". All four students were engaged in the online learning, according to their parents' observation.

A: "He liked the online class. He entered the online classroom by himself on time and sat patiently to learn throughout the class. He actively did the exercises after the class."

B: "She is studying in a Chinese School and seldom talk in English. With more than one year's online learning with native English-speaking teacher, her oral improved a lot. She can speak in English with confident now and is willing to speak in the English class. She even actively talked to her sister in English at home. As her oral English improved, her teacher recommended her to join the English drama activity."

C: "She engaged in online English learning and enjoyed the classes. She interacted with the teacher happily with fun in the classes. Her confident in English speaking was increased and her fluency was improved."

D: "He liked and longed for attending the online class. When the class starts, he went to the online classroom actively."

Students in general enjoyed the classes and felt happy about them. It resulted in them being willing to speak and perform actively to interact and engage in the classes.

Theme 2: Students Learnt from the Online Class

All four of the students learnt from the online classes. This learning was most evident in the following areas: grammar (4), vocabulary (2), speaking/oral (7) and examination/assessment (4)". Below are some of the conversations which show what they learnt and what the results were.

A: "His English was improved after learning from the online class. The improvement was reflected in his Examination results."

A: "He had chances to speak English more in the online classes. As a result, he was no longer afraid of speaking in English now."

B: "Her improvement reflected from the result in examination. She got higher marks in English subject."

D: "Before studying in the course, he did not willing to talk in English as he afraid he spoke wrongly. After joining the course, he began to talk more in English as his confidence was developed with his improved fluency. The course helped him a lot!"

D: "After a year of online English learning, his academic result of English subject was highly increased. It reflected in his marks in English subject examination."

After attending the online class which complemented the formal face-to-face class, the students' speaking/oral and grammar were improved. This was reflected in their confidence in speaking English and the results on the examinations.

Theme 3: Students Learnt from Pre-Class and Post-Class Activities

It was found that the students learnt from pre-class and post-class activities via "reading books (3) and doing homework (4)". Below are the examples of how the students learnt from these activities.

A: "Homework reinforced his English learning. He did homework after class. He even searched the websites to obtain further knowledge for completing his homework."

B: "She read the online books before classes and she actively finished the homework after class."

D: "He actively did all the homework by himself. He never missed any as he liked learning in the course!"

The pre-class and post-class activities were the learning activities developed using pedagogical design. With the learning initiative driven by online classes, students demonstrated self-directed learning to acquire further knowledge from non-prescribed sources for continuous learning.

Theme 4: Online Learning and Face-to-Face Learning

For the questions on comparing and complementing online learning and formal face-to-face learning in the school's classroom, the sub-themes identified were "complement (4), spelling (1), examination (1) and native teacher (6)".

A: "He learnt grammar and speaking in online class. It complemented his face-to-face learning which he has less chance to speak and with more chance to learning the spelling of English words."

B: "In face-to-face learning environment, she felt nervous when facing the teacher in person. In online learning environment, she felt more relax and was willing to speak more. Learning in both environments helped her to learn indeed but in different ways."

D: "Online learning complemented face-to-face learning's limitation. It is hard to have native speaking English teacher in the physical school for him to learn the native accent."

The most important point in regards to online learning complementing face-to-face learning was that the parents found their children could really learn with the native teachers who were living and teaching in English-speaking countries at the same time. The increased interaction time with these native teachers helped the students to learn English.

Theme 5: Teachers' Instructions and Interactions are Important

For questions regarding teachers, it was found that teachers' instructions and their interactions with the students are important. The sub-themes include "fun (2), patient (1), encourage (4), feedback (3), interaction (6), explain (4), native (2) and attention (1)". In one case, the student did not raise his questions but the teacher realised it and actively explained to the students:

A: "He understood the learning contents and the teacher explained to him appropriately most of the time. However, occasionally when he did not understand, the teachers sometimes did not realise and therefore did not explain to him."

R: "Have the student or you raise this problem to the teacher?"

A: "No, we didn't. Surprisingly, the teacher realised his problem and explained to him actively."

From other cases, the teachers also had clear instructions and were able to encourage interactions with the students.

B: "When she felt puzzled in the class and not answered the teacher's question, the teacher helped and explained to her."

C: "In online learning, the teacher encouraged her to answer the question and gave sufficient time for her to think and join the conversation. She understood she had to answer the teacher's question and therefore, she paid attention to the classes."

It was found that students or parents might not ask for help when the students do not understand. From these cases, teachers acted actively to ask if the students understood or had any questions more frequently. The role of the teacher, especially in giving teaching instructions and encouraging interaction, is important in online learning.

Theme 6: Difficulties in Online Learning

Students found difficulties in online learning. For learning related difficulties, they "need time to adapt (1), found teachers did not explain clearly (1), felt nervous (1) and found class too long (1)".

A: "He took about half year to adapt the online class. At the beginning, he rejected to attend the online class. Gradually, with familiarized with the learning environment and way of learning, he began to enjoy the classes… Now, he actively attended the class by himself and finish the after-class homework by himself."

A: "He felt nervous when he did not know how to answer the questions from the teacher in English. This improved when he familiarized with the class. He used his cell phone to search for the meaning of some English words to help him answering the teacher's questions."

B: "The online classes were scheduled in dinner time. We understood there were limitations like matching teacher and other classmates' time. The course helped her English learning a lot and we would continue the class even the time could not be changed."

For technical issues, the sub-themes are "uploading files (1), using the system (1), no sound (1), solved by themselves (2) and connection problems (2)".

A: "In one class, there was no sound heard. The teacher fixed the problem later and the class was continued. No other technical issues were found."

A: "He accessed the system by himself for the classes. After he finished his homework, he could upload it to the system without difficulties."

B: "Once the system was unable but she could continue the class after several times of re-logged in. She could solve technical problem by herself."

C: "Sometimes, Internet connection was poor and the teacher could not hear what she said."

Unlike studies performed in the past decade, technical issues became less significant for the new generation of both students and teachers. They could use the systems effectively and could solve technical issues by themselves.

Theme 7: Uniqueness of Online Learning

The parents found that the uniqueness of online learning can help to complement the students' face-to-face learning. The sub-themes identified are "native (5), international (4) and online support (1)".

A: "He could learn from teachers living in US in the online learning environment."

A: "His classmates were living in other countries, for example, Korea. It made me feel he was learning in an international school. They interact and learn from each other."

B: "Besides receiving notices via WhatsApp before class, the Class Teacher will contact us via WhatsApp if we did not attend the class on-time so we would not miss the classes. It is helpful!"

D: "We have tried nearly all other online English learning's school. Most of their problems are without curriculum design and teachers were from non-native English-speaking countries. It is hard to find a school with quality education provision."

Besides the advantages of learning from the native teachers who are living and teaching in the English-speaking countries which was discussed in the prior section, the parents found they had classmates from other countries or regions in the online class. Even though the students are having formal learning in a local school, they can experience the learning environment like an international school.

4. Discussion

It is concluded from the results of the thematic analysis that the most important elements in performing the redesign of online learning for complementing formal face-to-face learning are: (1) learning activities; (2) interactions; and (3) assessments. Figure 1 shows the "Golden Triangle of Learning Engagement."

Learning Activities
(Pre-class, In-class & Post-class)

Learning
Engagement

Interaction
(Teacher-Student & Peer Learning)
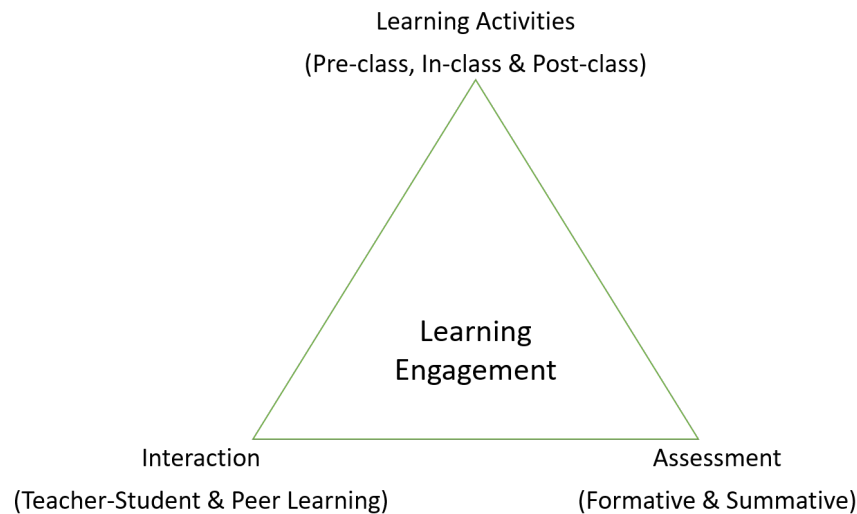
Assessment
(Formative & Summative)

Figure 1. Golden Triangle of Learning Engagement in Online Learning

In the golden triangle of learning engagement in online learning, the design of learning activities includes pre-class, in-class and post-class activities. Pre-class activities provide the students with an initial idea on what is going to be taught in the classes. With prior knowledge of the class, the teacher can spend much more time interacting with the students in the class. For in-class activities, the design should be interactive and interesting enough to attract the students' attention. To reinforce in-class learning, post-class activities should be designed appropriately to align with the concepts the students learnt in the class.

Interaction in the online environment is crucial in enhancing the learning engagement of the students. In most situations, educators focus on the teacher-student interaction which can be achieved by training the teachers to encourage the students to answer the questions, to ask the questions, and to discuss and reflect. As in the effective online classes, the number of students is usually limited to a small number. In the case of Protostar Education, the maximum number of students is 4. It leads to an environment in which students can communicate and interact with other students more easily. With careful instructional design, the students can interact with other students and learn via peer learning.

Assessment helps to measure the learning of the students. Besides formative assessment, which was conducted in the format of a post-class activity after each of the classes, the school can conduct summative assessments to measure the learning of the students over a period. For example, in this case, Protostar Education uses Star Reading by Renaissance (SR Test) to administer summative assessments to the students. Since the students learnt with the design of the course based on CCSS and with classes taught by native teachers in overseas countries, they used the same assessment used for assessing the English abilities of native English-speaking students. In the school's provisional studies, the students' assessment results are promising. The assessment of using the SR test for Protostar Education students' online English learning will be further studied as an extension of this research.

5. Conclusions

The seven themes found in this research are: (1) students engaged in online learning; (2) students learnt from the online class; (3) students learnt from pre-class and post-class activities; (4) online learning and face-to-face learning; (5) teachers' instructions and interactions are important; (6) difficulties in online learning; and (7) uniqueness of online learning.

From consolidating the results of the themes and sub-themes, it was found that the most important elements in redesigning the online course to complement formal face-to-face courses in order to enhance learning engagement are (1) learning activities (pre-class, in-class, and post-class); (2) interactions (teacher-student and peer-learning); and (3) assessments (formative and summative). A golden triangle of learning engagement was developed with these important elements.

One of the biggest advantages of qualitative research with individual interviews is that in-depth data can be collected. However, the limitation is the small number of samples. After this study, the results can be used as the scope of conducting large scale quantitative research. In addition, further studies can be conducted in the area of summative assessment using the SR test to analyse the effectiveness of this thoughtfully redesigned online learning course.

The research results show learning experiences were enhanced via appropriate redesign of interaction, learning activities, and assessments. The students were highly motivated in the online learning environment, and they enjoyed the learning content and learning activities. Both learning experiences and learning effectiveness were enhanced. This study result affirms positive impacts from the redesign of pedagogy in online learning of English for complementing formal face-to-face learning.

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