

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

PERSPECTIVES ON ESL MATERIAL UTILIZED IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

H. M. M. P. Wijerathna *

University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

* paramiwijerathna94@gmail.com

(Published 15 October 2021)

Abstract

In the face of the Covid-19 global pandemic the unprecedented demand for the use of Online platforms in the field of education increased in a blink of an eye posing a threat to the education system. This study is foregrounded on a group of undergraduate students in a Public University in Sri Lanka and the paper attempts to bring out the dire need to reconsider and revamp the teaching materials that have been used in ESL classrooms in order to meet the current as well as the future needs of the stakeholders of the process of teaching/learning. This study is qualitative in nature, and the data is gathered by both teachers and students using semi- structured interviews, classroom discussions and students' feedback. It concluded with the understanding that there is a dire need in adapting the materials considering the needs of the students in this new normal era.

Keywords: Online platforms, ESL materials, Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

Online learning that was initially perceived as an “extension of distance education” (Hubbard, 2009) has been redefined in the post-Covid reality as technology remains as the sole means through which the process of education could be continued. With the redefinition of Online learning as a result of the post-covid reality, the education system of Sri Lanka has been continuously facing many challenges and many have miserably failed in overcoming these hurdles successfully whereas some of these challenges have been successfully tackled. Redesigning and revamping teaching and learning materials that are utilized in the ESL classrooms considering the current situation of the pandemic ridden country is one such challenge that requires immediate attention of ESL teachers/material designers. Designing these materials in a manner in which they address the needs of an online classroom while acknowledging the presence of students who belong to different socio-economic and geo-political realities is quite a laborious task. In the absence of the physically present teacher in the classroom, materials utilized in the online ESL classroom is the only weaponry at the disposal of the teacher to deliver a learning experience to the students that is both interesting and effective. Students who are sitting in enclosed spaces staring at a smartphone/laptop screen are easily distracted; thereby it is paramount that the materials used in the online ESL classroom are engaging; so that the students participate in the learning process. In the study it was evident that most of the materials used in the online ESL classrooms are almost the same materials that were used in traditional face-to-face

classrooms with some minor alterations. This is a major drawback in the current teaching/learning process as most of these materials have failed to carry out an effective teaching/learning process. For a better understanding of the situation this study draws from the work of researchers such as (N. Hockly, 2012),(P. Hubbard,2009), (H. Reinders, 2012) and (P. Sharma,2010) which also provide the basis of the theoretical framework to this study. Moreover, it should be noted that Puentedura's (2010) SAMR model can be considered when designing online friendly ESL teaching/learning materials to make synchronous online teaching/learning effective. As materials play a crucial role in determining the success of a class, in online teaching it the key to conduct an effective online ESL class to the students.

2. Methodology

The study is designed as a qualitative research, aiming to analyze the ESL materials that are utilized in an online ESL classroom in a Public University of Sri Lanka. The study aims to understand the effectiveness of the ESL materials that are used in an online ESL classroom and highlight the need to redesign and re-vamp the materials considering the needs of the students in this "new-normal" era. The study also attempts to identify the crucial factors that need to be taken into consideration when designing online friendly materials to be utilized in a synchronous online class. The participants of the study are categorized into two groups; the first group consists of 06 ESL teachers who have firsthand experience in teaching ESL via the online platforms whereas the second group consists of 50 undergraduates who take ESL as a course. It should be noted that these students are divided into different groups or levels based on their competency level in English. The study was conducted by the data gathered from both ESL teachers and students. The data was gathered by conducting formal and semi-structured interviews, and focus- group discussions with both ESL teachers and students. Moreover, student feedback and classroom observations were also carried out to gather the required data.

3. Results and Discussions

At a time when learning/teaching process has limited to online platforms, the teachers' responsibility has doubled. The teacher while getting adapted him/her to the sudden and the drastic change should also tackle the challenges that have accompanied this unprecedented change. One such challenge is redesigning and revamping the ESL materials that are utilized in online classrooms considering the needs of the students and demands of the situation. The study identified some critical factors that should be taken into consideration when redesigning the materials. One major factor is the digital divide. The gathered data revealed that students, especially the ones whose competency level is low find it difficult and it is seemingly impossible for them to attend online lectures as they are unequipped. The analysis unveiled the fact that most of the students whose competency levels are low are from underprivileged areas with a few exceptions. Thereby, when redesigning these materials it is important to be sensitive to the factor that the students belong to different socio-economic and geo-political backgrounds and they do not have evenly access to the resources required in engaging in online learning. For example, during the informal discussions with students, one student revealed that it requires a laptop to complete most of the activities given in the class and he is unable to engage in these activities due to lack of resources. Moreover, 21 students expressed that they are hardly able to keep up with the online lectures due to unstable reception in their areas, especially due to bad weather conditions. In the course of the research it was also understood the redefinition; "technology allows for the creation of new tasks previously inconceivable" (Puentedura, 2010, as cited in Hockly, 2012), of material is important. The semi-structured interviews and informal discussions with the teachers shed light upon the fact that most of the activities that are included in the material are seemingly infeasible in an online classroom. For example, in one pair activity, it required one member of the pair to describe a picture to the other and after listening to the description, the other

student should draw the picture. This activity is designed to teach prepositions to the students but the teachers strongly stated that these kinds of activities are infeasible in an online classroom as students hardly follow the instructions and teachers' supervision is limited in an online classroom. It was evident that most of the materials utilized in the online classrooms are merely in the "substitution" (Puentedura, 2010, as cited in Hockly, 2012) stage of Puentedura's SAMR model where technology acts as a direct substitute without any functional improvement of the materials. For instance, when analyzing the materials, at the very beginning itself, I noticed that the hard copies of the material that were previously utilized in ESL classrooms are converted into PDF formats and word documents without making any significant improvements/changes. Furthermore, both teachers and students revealed that the online classrooms give a "sense of isolation" (Reinders, 2012) to the students as students attend the class through the use of an electronic device sitting in an enclosed room where the presence of peers and teacher which was earlier experienced in a traditional face-to face classroom was no longer felt. The teachers stressed upon the fact that online classrooms limit the interaction in the classroom which is crucial for an effective learning/teaching process to take place as supported by social cultural theories such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development which states "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Lamy & Hampel, 2007). Thereby, a significant finding of the research is that designing these materials incorporating fun ESL online games and other interactive activities is important to foster interaction in the classrooms which will lead to ensuring the participation of the students in the class. In addition, I set down to the understanding that with incorporation of technology the teachers/material designers are bestowed with the opportunity to make them more appealing to the eye by using colourful pictures, videos etc., which will eventually help them in arousing the interest of the students. This understanding is based on students' comments who revealed that initially it was fun engaging in online classes as the teacher used to show them videos during the class. When redesigning the materials, one needs to utilize different options the technology provides to enjoy its benefits to the fullest. Technology widens the scope of creativity of the teachers and allows them to surpass the previous limitations. Accordingly it is evident that there are many factors to be considered when redesigning the materials and if the teacher/material designer overcome the challenges posed by the current circumstances and designed materials considering the needs of the students, he/she will be able to deliver the best to the students.

4. Conclusion

On a positive note, there are many advantages with the introduction of technology to the field of education as the world is developing and technology is advancing day by day. Thus, it is important for educators and students to be compatible with the modern world. At the time being, technology plays a major role in the field of education. Owing to the current pandemic situation we have resorted to online learning as it is the only option that we are left with to continue the education of students. Under such circumstances, it is obvious that the "role of the teacher [has] shifted from traditional teaching to a greater creative and facilitative role" (Jansz and Gunawardena, 2013). Even though we face certain mishaps at the beginning, at the end of the day we have incorporated technology into our courses and teaching/learning materials to keep education updated, upgraded and most importantly, ongoing. However, this incorporation of technology has been problematic as discussed above as the manner in which technology has incorporated, especially in redesigning the materials need to be given an afterthought. When incorporating technology into learning/teaching process and when redesigning materials, as the research findings reveal, one needs to be considerate about aforesaid factors such as digital divide, classroom interaction and the proper use of technology to gain its fullest benefits. Unarguably, technology helps learners and teachers to acquire great limits in the field of education therefore the use of technology should be always encouraged in learning contexts.

References

- Hockly, N. (2012). Mobile Learning. *ELT Journal* 67(1): pp. 80-84.
- Hubbard, P. (2009). *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Jansz, M., & Gunawardena, S. (2013). Teacher 2.0: Does the language teacher need to upgrade?
- Lamy, M. N., & Hampel, R. (2007). Learning theories. In *Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 19-30). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Richards, J. C., & Burns, A. (Eds.). (2012). *The Cambridge guide to pedagogy and practice in second language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sharma, P. (2010). Blended learning. *ELT journal* 64(4): 456-458.