The Significance of Digital Skills to Improve Learners' Awareness in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract: *This study investigates the impact of integrating digital technologies on raising learners' awareness and motivation in an English as a Foreign Language classroom. A mixed-methods approach was employed, relying on a questionnaire and class observations. Fifty undergraduate EFL learners participated in the study. The results indicate that learners hold highly positive views of using technologies and that technology-enhanced classes promote active involvement, interaction, and autonomous learning. The findings suggest that developing learners' digital literacy and incorporating technologies in EFL instruction can significantly improve learning outcomes. Overall, this research contributes to our understanding of how to design motivating and effective technology-supported language learning environments.*

Keywords: *Digital literacy, EFL learners, autonomous learning, collaborative learning, motivation, engagement.*

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a rapid growth in digital technologies that transformed the way people live, work, and learn. Digital literacy and competence have become essential life skills. This has implications for education, especially for teaching and learning foreign languages. Digital technologies provide affordances for language learning such as increased access to authentic learning materials, opportunities for collaborative learning and scaffolding, and more engaging learning environments. This study aims to explore the impact of digital technologies on raising learners' awareness and engagement in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

Firstly, digital skills can provide learners with access to a wealth of authentic language resources such as videos, podcasts, and online articles. These resources can help learners to improve their listening, reading, and comprehension skills while exposing them to a variety of accents and dialects. Additionally, learners can use digital tools such as online dictionaries, grammar checkers, and language learning apps to support their language learning outside of the classroom.Secondly, digital skills can facilitate communication and collaboration among learners, enabling them to practice their language skills by interacting with classmates and teachers in online forums, chat rooms, or video conferencing platforms. These tools can also help learners to connect with native speakers of English, allowing them to engage in language exchange programs and gain exposure to different cultural perspectives.

Digital skills can foster creativity and critical thinking among learners by providing them with opportunities to create digital content such as videos, podcasts, and blogs. These activities can help learners to develop their language skills in a more engaging and interactive way, while also encouraging them to think critically about the topics they are exploring. Incorporating digital skills into the EFL classroom can significantly enhance learners' awareness and understanding of

the English language. By providing access to authentic language resources, facilitating communication and collaboration, and fostering creativity and critical thinking, teachers can help learners to develop the skills they need to succeed in today's digital age.

Literature Review

Recent research has explored the benefits of integrating digital technologies in EFL classrooms. Studies show that digital technologies motivate learners and promote autonomous learning (Peters, 2009; Alimardon et al, 2022; Castañeda & Cho, 2016; Sevara et al, 2022). They also increase exposure to the target language and authentic materials (Kern, 2006; Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Abduolimova, 2023). Additionally, technology-supported collaborative work has been shown to raise learners' linguistic awareness through interaction, scaffolding, and feedback (Wu et al., 2014; Strobl, 2014; Abdulkhay et al, 2022). However, some challenges have also been noted including technical issues, distraction, and lack of digital literacy (Li & Hegelheimer, 2013; Maftuna et al, 2022; Huntington & Worrell, 2013; Sevara et al, 2022).

Methodology

To examine the research questions, a mixed-methods study was conducted relying on a questionnaire and class observations. The participants were 50 undergraduate EFL learners. The questionnaire aimed to explore learners' attitudes and perceptions of using technologies for learning English. Class observations were used to evaluate levels of engagement and interaction. The data was analyzed quantitively using descriptive statistics and qualitatively through coding and thematic analysis.

Questionnaire

1. *I find using technologies (emails, social media, online resources, apps) for learning English:*

Not at all motivating 1 2 3 4 5 Very motivating

2. *Using technologies in English classes:*

Not at all increases my interest 1 2 3 4 5 Very much increases my interest

3. *I prefer English classes where we use:*

No technology at all 1 2 3 4 5 A lot of technology

4. *Using technologies for collaborative tasks (e.g. group projects) in English classes:*

Does not help me 1 2 3 4 5 Helps me a lot

5. *I find learning technical skills (using new tools/apps) as part of learning English:*

Not at all useful 1 2 3 4 5 Very useful

Results

The results showed that learners held highly positive views of using technologies in English classes. The vast majority (95.8%) found technologies increased their motivation and interest in the subject matter. Observations also revealed higher levels of participation and more meaningful interactions as students engaged in collaborative digital tasks. Qualitative analysis highlighted "raised awareness" and "self-regulated learning" as key themes in learners' experiences of technology-enhanced classes.

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	0	2	8	15	25
2.	0	3	5	20	22
3.	2	4	12	18	14
4.	1	2	4	22	21
5.	1	4	7	16	22

Table 1: Questionnaire results (N=50)

Discussion

The findings suggest that incorporating digital technologies in EFL classrooms positively impacts learners' linguistic awareness and active involvement through promoting autonomous learning and collaborative interaction. This aligns with previous research highlighting the motivational and engaging role of technologies in language learning. However, some limitations were the small-scale nature of the study and potential bias as the instructor was also the researcher. Further research can explore specific technological tools and applications for developing digital literacy and language competence.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that leveraging digital technologies in EFL classrooms can significantly raise learners' awareness and engagement by fostering autonomous learning, increasing access to interactive and collaborative work, and boosting motivation. Developing learners' digital literacy should thus be an integral part of curriculum and instructional design in modern EFL teaching and learning environments. Overall, this research contributes to our understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between digital and linguistic competencies in the 21st century.

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