

Chapter 12

Integrating Online Tools to Motivate Young English Language Learners to Practice English Outside the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Recent research shows that online tools such as: games, wikis, speaking avatars, and interactive stories can be a positive force for English Language Learners (ELLs). It also shows that when ELLs have access to online tools, they are motivated to practice English outside the classroom (Aydin, 2007; Colombo & Colombo, 2007; Son, 2007). Most of this research is undertaken with older learners. This case study attempts to determine if young learners are motivated to practice English outside the classroom if provided with access to various online tools managed via a wiki. A wiki is a free educational web space, which allows a number of people to work together collaboratively on documents with embedded elements and linking. The teacher interviewed parents and kept observational notes. The study results suggest that the online tools improve the listening and speaking skills of young learners.

INTRODUCTION

Young learners are surrounded by digital technologies that did not exist when their parents were in school. As these digital technologies increasingly become part of our students' learning culture, re-

searchers in the field of English language teaching have begun to investigate their potential when integrated in the young learner curriculum. As Goodwin-Jones (2005) points out, "While none of these technologies was developed to support language learning, they are being used for that purpose, sometimes directly, sometimes as a side benefit. Given the wide-spread acceptance and use

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1855-8.ch012

by students of these technologies, it may be of interest to examine some of the ways in which they are being adapted for use in formal and informal language learning” (Goodwin-Jones, 2005, p.1).

I discovered in conversations and via email exchanges that many of the parents of the children that I work with wanted to encourage their children to use English outside of the classroom. Considering the increasing access to technology that children have and the increasing desire to deploy such technologies in education I chose to try to deal with this parental desire by integrating Internet resources and tools into the existing curriculum. The parents lived in the country of their native tongue and for the most part spoke their native language at home, although many of the parents have a good command of English. In communications with the parents, however, they often indicated they would speak English with their children if given specific tasks. For example, parents would read English stories, do English finger plays, and sing English songs. Each child would learn in a different way and some parents asked for specific English language tasks to improve specific skills, such as how to improve their child’s listening or pronunciation skills. Before I set up my wiki web space I would support the parents by sharing a resource or link through e-mail. I wanted, however, to establish a central location to provide the parents with a range of resources, such as supporting videos, which would allow documents to be uploaded, and also allowing students and parents to contribute to the website in an easy way. After researching online tools for teachers, I determined that a wiki web space best met these needs.

A wiki is a (usually) free web site for teachers providing them with the ability to continuously add videos, links to other useful sites providing various kinds of ready made and authentic materials, pdfs from classes, PowerPoint slides, and widgets. A teacher can make the wiki web space private, add a translation button, and include specific users who can contribute to the pages. Privacy is a

very important issue when working with young learners and certainly helps reassure parents that their children will not be in danger by using these materials without too much supervision.

I therefore created the English Story Time Wiki free web space with the materials, links, and resources previously collected (Appendix A). For example, a page was created with English songs that we had sung in the classroom that included the lyrics and tunes. Another page was created that included English chants and finger plays (Appendix B). The parents were introduced to the wiki web site in several ways. I sent each parent a letter with the website address, included a video tutorial that showed parents how to navigate each of the pages and how to use the resources (Appendix C). I also conducted a free parent and teacher workshop to introduce them to wiki web space and provide information about privacy and other issues.

MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Teachers struggle with motivating young learners to use the new vocabulary they learn even in the subsequent classes. Young learners who study English for a minimal amount of time per week especially have problems remembering the vocabulary and may use the L1 in an effort to communicate. A primary goal of teachers is to build the lexicon of young learners, especially beginners. With such a short period of instructional time, however, young learners need exposure to the language outside of the classroom in order to practice their vocabulary in various contexts. However, even if inclined to do so, they find it hard to find ways of practicing language outside of the class.

ELLs also need to be provided with opportunities outside of the classroom to practice listening and speaking skills. These skills are classically ones that are neglected and there is just not the time in regular classes to do them justice. One

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