

EXPLORING HOW DIGITAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGY CAN FOSTER SAUDI EFL STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Digital media technology has become an integral part of daily life for almost all young students, and for the majority of Saudi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Digital media technology may not be limited to one or two kinds; it has various types such as software and programs, devices, application, websites, social media tools, etc. In addition, Saudi Arabia has a substantial young population who are becoming more digital-savvy and increasingly connected through digital media technology, which may include social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets, and websites such as Google Translate, just to mention a few.

Recently, it has been widely seen that digital media technology has greatly influenced education practices in many countries, especially in economically advanced economies. Due to the novelty of digital media learning, there is a pressing need to consider the integration of digital media technology to enhance contextual and collaborative language learning practice outside of the school, and to capitalise on out-of-class language learning opportunities.

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which digital media technology can enhance intentional language learning outside of the school. To accomplish the research aims, a mixed-method study will be conducted to achieve its goals. Quantitative research tools (a questionnaire) will be utilised to collect the data. This questionnaire will be designed electronically through Survey Monkey. It will be distributed to Year 12 Saudi male students in 20 high schools in two different areas, metropolitan and rural. The aim of choosing these two areas is to be an attempt to also explore whether digital media technology may influence intentional language learning amongst students living in different areas. On the other hand, qualitative data will be obtained from focus-group interviews with those students. Four focus-group interviews will be organised after administering the questionnaire. Moreover, online weekly journals will be employed to triangulate the data.

KEYWORDS

Education Technology, digital media, intentional learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital media technology is used as an important tool in Education, and in specific to teach and learn English as Foreign Language (EFL) around the world (Barrett and Sharma 2007; Kern 2006; Yi 2012). Social and cultural factors can impact how digital media is utilized in education and this is particularly evident in Saudi educational systems (Al-Ahaydib 1986; Al-Saggaf 2004; Al-shehri 2012). A significant factor in the Saudi educational system is that students from Kindergarten to Year 12 are not allowed to bring and use any personal digital devices inside the school. Therefore, it is important to investigate the influence of outside-of-school intentional use of digital media in educational practices at year 12 level, as a sample of Saudi EFL students.

1.1 Background of the Study

Around the world, English language learning as a foreign language continues to be an increasingly popular and significant area of education. Previous research suggests that EFL classrooms in many different countries - especially the Middle East - are generally teacher- centred (Al-Saggaf 2004). The mode of teaching and

learning is didactic with students often consigned passive roles (Al-Fahad 2009; Al-shehri 2012; Chen 2007), and are often predominantly 'in-class' learners, with little systematic study taking place outside of the school (Al-shehri 2012; Chen 2007). Consequently, some researchers (Ito et al. 2008; Kolb 2008) have posited that young people might well be engaging in tacit forms of English language learning through the process of using digital media technologies.

The growing interest amongst Saudi education professionals and policy makers for exploring the potential of digital media for English language learning necessitates a research study to address the intentional digital media usage among Saudi EFL learners (Chao and Chen 2009; Nassuora 2012; Phuangthong and Malisawan 2005). Such a study should investigate the extent to which intentional digital media usage may foster their English language learning. Moreover, language learning through digital technologies is not limited to time and place; synchronous and asynchronous learning can take place regardless time and space (Livingstone 2012; Selwyn 2011). It is evident that digital media can be used in any educational field and in any context (Al-Jarf 2014; Jarvis 2013). Therefore, this study will explore how digital media can play a significant role in fostering English language learning among a sample of Saudi high school students.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

Some EFL students may have a desire to use digital media technology to improve their English language abilities outside the school. Investigating the impact of the external environment on the improvement of EFL intentional learning and the language use is very important (Al-shehri 2012). Students may need practice to be successful self-regulated learners. They may also need to have more freedom from the traditional teacher-centred style of teaching to practice the language in their everyday activities.

Within the Saudi context, there is a rapid growth of using new digital media technologies; there are also local needs of Arabic youth with regard to English learning (Al-Ahaydib 1986; Al-Fahad 2009). Moreover, (Haq and Smadi 1996: 311) noted that Saudi students look at English language learning as "an instrument for cultural and technological transfer and advancement." This study is expected to shed light on how Saudi EFL students can benefit from digital media use to intentionally foster their English language learning outside of the school. Understanding how digital media is used among Saudi high school EFL students could provide insights into how to improve the learning experiences for students in the Saudi context using digital media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study will be conducted in Saudi Arabia among EFL students. Therefore, it is essential to have a brief overview of the context of learning English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia.

The beginning of EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia can be traced to the mid-1920s (Al-Ahaydib 1986). Around 1958, English was taught in selected schools in Grades 7-9 (Al-Abdulkader 1979). Since 1970, English has been taught in Saudi public schools from Grades 7-12. Currently, English is widely used in the Saudi community, including in many business organizations. Within the huge and widespread of using digital media technology, English language in the Saudi context has become more prevalent, especially among young people who have greater potential to use these new technologies in their daily lives for intentional learning purposes.

Several researchers attempted to define the intentional learning (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1989; Subagdja, Sonenberg, and Rahwan 2009). One of the recent definitions was proposed by Lee, Rooney, and Parada (2014: 2) and stated that "intentional learning occurs when a learner wants to learn, sees the need to learn, believes in the need to learn, knows what to learn, knows what is needed to learn and knows how to learn." Intentional learning through digital media can occur in several different ways to learn English language whether they are educational or non- educational methods. Therefore, there would be a connection between intentional learning and the implementation of digital media, especially in a context where students are highly engaged with technology and digital media like the Saudi EFL one.

Digital media can be used for English language learning within two social areas, at school and outside of school (Gee 2004). The widest area of English language learning takes place in the outer and larger social context; outside of school when students intentionally use digital media for learning, because of the variety of

content, as well as the various tools used. Various research studies (Al-Jarf 2014; Al-shehri 2012; Lu 2008; Jarvis 2013) investigated the use of digital media technology in EFL learning context and reported significant results.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The overarching aim of this study is to understand the use of technologies for fostering EFL learning in the Saudi context. To achieve this aim, three concrete purposes are crafted to support it. First is to explore what kind of digital media technologies Saudi EFL high school students are using for English language learning. Second, is to identify how the most frequent digital media is used among Saudi EFL high school students to intentionally learn the four main skills of English language (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, and listening) outside school. The third aim is to examine the processes that underlie how Saudi students intentionally use digital resources to acquire specific (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, listening) English language skills. These aims will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How are Saudi EFL students using digital media to intentionally learn the four main skills of English language (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, and listening) outside the school context?
2. What are the strategies students used to intentionally learn English using the most preferred types of digital media outside the school context?
3. What are the factors that influence the choice of identified digital media in learning English outside the school context?

These Research Questions will be answered through a cross-sectional mixed-method study that will be conducted on a cohort group of year 12 Saudi EFL students. There will be three phases in this study. In the first phase, quantitative data will be collected through a questionnaire that will investigate the prevalent use of digital media technology and how Saudi EFL students intentionally learn English outside of the school. This questionnaire has some Likert-scale questions and open-ended ones. The participants in this questionnaire will be Year 12 Saudi EFL male students from 20 high schools, with 10 schools located in metropolitan areas and 10 in rural areas. The anticipated sample size is between 300-400 students that will be chosen randomly. The questionnaire will be designed electronically in Survey Monkey and distributed during school time using school computer labs.

The qualitative part will be in the second and third phases. In the second phase, semi-structured focus-group interviews will be utilized as a complementary method to investigate participants' experiences and knowledge relating to their prevalent digital media practices in and out of school. These interviews will be guided through a semi-structured style that is unique and would be suitable for this study; this type of interviews gives the researcher "some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies" (Bryman 2008: 196). These interviews will be audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and their parents for those who are under the age of 18. The final third phase will be an online journal through which students will provide their insights and practical experiences in using digital media technology within four weeks. In this online journal, students will be asked to use their digital media technologies in the sake of learning English language outside of the school. Then they will be asked to describe their experiences by briefly answer three main questions. These questions will ask the participants about what types of digital media they have been using, what they are using that type for, and what they have learned by using that type. The participants in these two phases will be chosen from the questionnaire's participants and invited to participate.

The collected quantitative and qualitative data will be carefully analysed to achieve the study aims and answer the research questions. It is anticipated that this study will provide valuable data to guide the implementation of policies to support and foster intentional English language learning in the Saudi context. It is also expected that this study will contribute to the development of alternative language learning environments which environment that stimulate English language learning among Saudi EFL learners. Moreover, it is envisaged that the study will provide convincing evidence to support the implement of useful ideas and new materials into the Saudi curriculum and teaching policies to benefit from the booming technologies in the Saudi EFL context.

4. CONCLUSION

It is anticipated that this study will provide valuable data to guide the implementation of policies to support and enhance English language learning in the Saudi context. It is also expected that this study will contribute to the development of alternative language learning environments which environment that stimulate English language learning among Saudi EFL learners. Moreover, it is envisaged that the study will provide convincing evidence to support the implement of useful ideas and new materials into the Saudi curriculum and teaching policies to benefit from the booming technologies in the Saudi EFL context.

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