

SHORT PAPER

INTEGRATING ONLINE SERVICES INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: THE CASE OF VOKI

Integrating Online Services into English Language Teaching and Learning: The Case of Voki

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Abstract—The article deals with teaching English as a foreign language with the use of modern Internet technologies. The emphasis is upon the online application Voki and beneficial ways to implement it in the classroom. The article also presents an overview of classroom activities using Voki aimed at developing students' communication skills.

Index Terms—Communicative competences, English language teaching, Internet technology in education, Voki

I. INTRODUCTION

More and more learners around the world are getting access to all the advantages technology can provide. Regardless of the field of study, learning is supported by a virtual learning environment following the current tendencies in social and professional communication. Nowadays it is vitally important to take a broad view of technology in terms of variety of teaching-learning tools available and being continuously introduced. With regard to meeting educational objectives, high-quality e-learning resources and professionally-developed and authentic materials are of primary concern. One of the main advantages of teaching and learning English with the help of Web tools is that visual data such as images, animation, graphics, sounds, etc. have a greater appeal to learners than printed material. By incorporating digital resources into English language learning, students are able to learn better as they use multiple sensory modalities which make them motivated to pay more attention to the information presented. Therefore, multimedia provides an opportunity to acquire and memorize information better.

The common problem educators face in e-learning in general and students using Internet in particular is that they tend to be addictive. It is important to highlight that nowadays students are overloaded and multi-tasking and often are not aware of how to organize their time online wisely. It is a challenge both for teachers and students to deal with the information scope in the modern world: on the one hand it expands opportunities, on the other hand a large amount of information is never used in real life. Consequently, the teaching tools which can meet educational needs and save time of educators and learners, i.e. easy-to-use and practical, are in great demand. The more teachers are aware of web teaching-learning tools, the better they can regulate students using them purposefully to meet their learning needs.

II. APPLYING VOKI FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

In this paper we are considering the online service Voki that we have integrated into teaching first-year students in English language classes. Voki is a Web 2.0 [1] tool, a free online service that allows users to create personalized speaking avatars and embed them in a blog or wiki or send them via e-mail. Voki is being used by teachers of various subject areas. It offers a powerful and enjoyable way to practice speaking, listening and writing in English. English language learners are able to record their voices and share the voice messages. Vokis create a wide range of new opportunities for language teachers to extend their learners' speaking skills in a fun and engaging way. Besides, due to the typing option they enable to enhance learners' writing skills.

Voki application is designed to be intuitive, easy to use without previous experience. It does not require downloading any software but simply run through a web-browser on any computer connected to the Internet. Moreover, "digital natives" (new generation born after 1980 and grown up with Internet technology) are likely to understand the principles behind Voki and associate it with other widgets they have already used. Following the simple steps one can start using Voki for educational purposes:

- Sign up for Voki at www.voki.com and create a user account;
- Create an avatar by using buttons on the menu bar;
- Use various options for customizing Voki;
- Add a voice: text to speech, record by microphone, or upload a pre-recording audio file;
- Publish your Voki;
- Send your work to the teacher using the "send to a friend" option or add it to your site using the embed code attached. [2, 3]

Exploring the potential of Voki, researchers distinguish the following language learning opportunities it provides. This Web 2.0 tool: enables users to express themselves on the web; is accessible both at home and in the classroom; increases motivation; enables students to be creators of something unique, of which they have ownership; facilitates the transition from teacher-centered, class-based learning to one in which the learner begins to acquire individual responsibility; allows learners to role-play and

hide behind a mask (an avatar), creating a distancing effect which appeals to more reluctant speakers. [4]

One of the main problems that can be solved with the help of web resources is making hesitant students talk which is a clue to developing their communication competences. Beyond doubt, young people have much to say about urgent problems and contribute to their solutions, some of them, though, do not feel confident to share their ideas in front of the class but they can do it on-line. When it comes to expressing ideas in a foreign language, such students might need time to put them into words and the Internet communication provides this opportunity. Furthermore, the opportunity to change the speech pronounced by a Voki character allows students to practice their fluency and pronunciation. "If students record their own voices rather than type what's to be said, they can play recordings back to themselves and practise their delivery in a safe, unthreatening way". [5]

All in all, applying Voki for English language teaching enables students to create and change content by working autonomously with regard to their individual learning needs and abilities.

III. ACTIVITIES BASED ON VOKI SERVICE

Voki as an educational technology tool is well-designed to base lessons aimed at developing learners' speaking, listening and writing skills. Besides, it establishes conditions to involve the participants into situations where they make decisions on the ways how to plan and fulfill their work inside and outside the classroom.

Various types of English language teaching and learning activities can be designed on the basis of Voki application. Let us review some of them:

Introducing oneself. At the beginning of the academic year, students could create avatars to represent themselves as an introduction to the class. They modify avatars to resemble their real-life appearance as much as possible and record personal information about themselves (where they are from, what they like doing, etc.)

Storytelling. After reading a short story, the teacher asks students to retell it in the name of different characters. To do this, he/she asks to create an avatar that looks like the character they choose and record their story. It is more natural for students to present other people talk using Voki avatars. Besides, preparing for a Voki creation will enable students to carefully organize their thoughts as the recording time is limited. This develops students' writing and speaking skills in English for a variety of purposes and audiences in a variety of genres.

Describing characters. As Voki options allow customizing clothes, accessories, hair, skin color, etc., choosing backgrounds and accents, it perfectly suits the discussion about personal identification. Students create various characters, and then they ask and answer questions about appearances, clothes styles, age, nationality, etc. [6]

"Guess who?" Students are asked to introduce themselves using Voki, send their Vokis to the teacher's email for him/her to create a collection and show it in class to let students guess who the author is. This activity might initiate an interesting discussion; it also enables quieter learners to express themselves.

Describing weather. Choose among backgrounds illustrating different seasons and weather conditions. Make your avatar speak about the weather on the background.

Giving instructions. The teacher plays Voki speaking to give instructions, pose questions or introduce grammar patterns just for a change. Ready-to-use audio files in this case can be uploaded to Voki.

Recording dialogues. Pair work can include recording dialogues between avatars on different topics, argumentative discussions upon this or that idea, as well as presenting the result of collaborative learning activity.

Acting out interviews. The activity involves in two main steps: students recording questions to interview group mates, then recording answers to their peers' questions.

Recording reviews. Students produce records to review what they experienced during classroom activities, report about their progress in English learning; share their impressions of what they have watched or read. It can save time for oral speaking preparation in class, organize students ideas and build the collection of useful listening materials that can be used for further analyses, peer correction or other educational purposes.

Poetry. Students create avatars to recite short poetry which improves their fluency in speaking.

Famous people. After conducting research on famous people, students could create avatars that resemble these famous people to present information, such as why they were important in history.

Advertising. Students use Voki avatars to persuade the audience to act, for instance, purchasing a product or voting for a candidate. [7]

Parodying. Students create an avatar that represents a famous celebrity /politician/ historical figure. Students can then use voice imitation to create a cartoon version of the figure. [8]

Radio broadcasting. Students have the unique challenge of establishing a great speaking voice as well as an on-air persona. [8]

Commenting. Students listen to the recorded speech and voice their own opinion on the issue.

Incorporating Voki into the teaching and learning process can serve as a showcase of student work as well as for peer review and assessment. [9] A wide range of ways to utilize Voki in education for speaking and listening, role-playing and presentations make it a unique learning tool for students of different age groups and levels of language proficiency.

IV. PRACTICE OF IMPLEMENTING VOKI IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

The practical experience of implementing Voki has been gained during English language classes at Tomsk Polytechnic University and assessed by the participants. Let us have a closer look at the activities aimed at developing speaking skills and mastering vocabulary on the topic "Travelling" designed by the author for the first-year students.

After a group of students (Pre-Intermediate level) studied educational materials on modules "Eating out" and "Types of holidays" we suggested them to create Vokis and record their short reviews on the restaurants/ cafes

they had visited, the hotels they had stayed in. While listening to other students' reviews they were to decide which place they would like to visit and then explain their choice.

Another group of students (Elementary) were asked to record their instructions on how to get to a landmark of their choice in the city without naming the sight they were directing to. The activity was assigned after mastering the relevant vocabulary and linguistic structures (*go straight ahead, take the first turning to the left/right, take a bus, get off, etc.*). While listening to one another's records, they were to guess what landmarks were meant by the speakers.

The activities were conducted both in class and set as homework. According to the experience gained by applying Voki in English language teaching, the following practical tips might be helpful:

- Identify the objectives and outcomes of the activity;
- Internet connection should be reliable;
- Set the task and explain the procedure of working with Voki application;
- Make sure students are familiar with assessment criteria (e.g. length of speech, coherence, linguistic accuracy);
- Provide sufficient but not excessive assistance;
- Provide feedback;
- Use the Voki samples created by students for introducing the online service to those who are not familiar with it.

The students, engaged into the activities utilizing the Voki service in English learning, provided feedback to it by assessing their experience. Filling in a survey, fifteen respondents documented that applying Voki increased their willingness to speak in the target language (87%), encouraged their creativity (67%), helped them to plan their oral presentation (60%), made studying process exciting (93%), enabled to remember words and language structures better (67%), made the studying process individual-oriented (53%). The results of the analysis of the questionnaire confirmed that learners had a positive experience using the given online service for language learning as it provided a learning environment that was fun, enjoyable, stress free and effective for improving their speaking skills.

V. CONCLUSION

In the modern world technology is becoming an integral part of the learning process. The effect of using Web resources for education can hardly be overestimated. Wise incorporation of web elements into the teaching-learning process will make the lessons more effective, creative and motivational. Internet technology provides an opportunity to create an engaging and personalized learning environ-

ment, to optimize teaching and learning as well as to enrich students' practical experiences in self-study, getting and processing information and communication. Therefore, applying e-learning tools aims at the development of independent, initiative, creative and critical thinking future specialists in-demand of modern information society.

We can conclude that implementing the online application Voki in English language teaching and learning meets the above-mentioned educational objectives. Different types of activities can be successfully organized with the help of the given service due to its interactivity, easiness and multifunction. The online application Voki is one of the tools that have proved to be relevant and efficient for English language learning since it promotes learning that is active, collaborative, constructive, authentic, and goal oriented.

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