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E-learning as an aid to reading

A study analyses the effects of e-learning on improving reading for learning a foreign language.

Education and training now also pass through new technologies and digital tools. **E-learning** has become an excellent way of teaching, made even more widespread by the distance learning imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. By resorting to new technologies and the use of the Internet, the traditional form of education has been revolutionised, as it has enabled learning to break free from time and geographical constraints, allowing students to access online courses anytime and from anywhere. The only indispensable tool is an electronic device capable of connecting to the Net, such as computers, tablets and smartphones.

E-learning has proven to be very effective in school learning, both for primary, middle and high school students and for university students. But that is not all. The use of new technologies and digital tools is also often used in the **study of English and other foreign languages**, with specific **online courses**. Teaching a foreign language must include all four basic skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. According to studies, reading and text comprehension are among the most important skills for success.

E-learning and reading: the study

Demonstrating the **effectiveness of reading** in learning a foreign language was a research study, Scrutinising the Effects of e-Learning on Enhancing EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension and Reading Motivation, conducted by Indian, Iranian and Iraqi researchers and published in February 2022. Reading comprehension, the researchers explain, is a "complex cognitive process" because it involves the interaction between the text, the surrounding environment and the reader, who must be able to understand what he or she has read and to contextualise it. From a technical point of view, reading consists of deciphering information, sentences and lexical periods of a written text so as to be able to represent it in one's memory, an operation that is fundamental for understanding it effectively. To achieve this, knowledge of the vocabulary of the foreign language in which the text is written is also necessary. **Motivation** to read also plays a key role, both in increasing comprehension of the written text and in enriching vocabulary and, thus, learning the foreign language. Therefore, the researchers emphasised that "students' motivation to study a foreign language is essential for their success. It is crucial for achieving learning objectives'. This is because if a learner is motivated, he will participate more frequently in learning activities, which will enable him to improve his knowledge of the foreign language.

E-learning in foreign language teaching can generally be an effective and beneficial method for learners. Moreover, online learning also seems to help with reading and comprehension of written text, as well as with motivation. This is the result of the study, which experimented with the use of e-learning and then evaluated the comprehension of what the student had read. To do this, 101 students from an English language institute in Ahvaz (Iran) were taken into consideration. Of these, 60 were chosen to participate in the study. They were all female, aged between 20 and 33. The research participants had been studying English as a second or foreign language since 2014. These 60 female students were then divided into two groups, one experimental and one control, and both were administered a language proficiency test, a reading comprehension test and a reading motivation questionnaire before the start of the study. The level of English proficiency was measured through the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), a test designed to measure a candidate's ability in a foreign language through knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and through listening skills. The second instrument, on the other hand, was based on the contents of the participants' course book and was structured with 40 text comprehension questions.

After the pre-tests, the participants in the experimental group received a treatment comprising eight **lessons delivered via e-learning**. On the other hand, the members of the control group were subjected to traditional teaching through eight lectures conducted in physical locations and face-to-face with their teachers. Finally, after the teaching, both groups were again administered a reading comprehension test and motivation questionnaire to determine the impact of the treatment on their reading comprehension and motivation.

The results

Before receiving the differentiated training (e-learning or traditional), the students in both groups had achieved similar average scores in the reading comprehension test. But, subsequently, the experimental group, which had been taught digitally, showed a higher average score than the control group on the test related to comprehension of what had been read. The researchers then pointed out that "there were significant differences between the two groups' reading **comprehension** post-tests": in fact, the experimental group "performed better on the reading comprehension post-test" than the control group.

With regard to reading motivation, the two groups also differed, depending on the training they received. In fact, before the start of the experiment, the two groups had the same level of motivation. The results show that, after the differentiated training of the two groups, the experimental participants revealed an **improvement in motivation**, as well as in their ability to use the foreign language to hold a conversation. In essence, the study showed that e-learning instruction can help learners of a foreign language "improve reading comprehension and reading motivation".

The aim of this research was to "study the impact of e-learning on the reading comprehension and desire to read" of Iranian pupils studying English as a second or foreign language (EFL).

The benefits of e-learning in the study of foreign languages

The study conducted by the Iranian, Indian and Iraqi researchers also showed other advantages of using e-learning in foreign language learning. Indeed, digital training is not only useful for improving reading comprehension and motivation, but has a number of other features that can be of greater benefit than traditional learning. In particular, scholars have highlighted the following advantages of e-learning

- Allows learners to **save travel time** and eliminate transport problems, because lessons can be taken from home;
- It **saves money**, related to transport or living on campus or in a city other than the one in which one resides;
- It does not tie the student to a specific place and time, but allows him/her to attend classes in any environment and, if recorded, at any time;
- **Eliminates anxiety**: pupils may feel nervous about learning a foreign language in face-to-face lessons and confronting the teacher directly may be a source of discomfort. Therefore, the use of e-learning can reduce learning anxiety;
- It allows **studying and working** at the same time: students can work full-time while taking an online course to learn a foreign language;
- Gives students access to platforms that may present a variety of different techniques for each type of learner, allowing them to build their own learning method;
- Allows learners to access different types of learning tools, such as animations, sounds, videos, completion exercises and self-assessments. One of the most significant tools of e-learning is lecture recording: in this way, if a learner has not been able to participate in the lecture held online at a given time, he or she can always retrieve it, avoiding the risk of not understanding the subject due to his or her absence (as often happens in traditional teaching);
- It gives pupils the opportunity to use the tools they have already used several times and to access the same class several times: in this way, it is possible to benefit several times from the teacher's explanation;
- Allows pupils to take practice tests and mock **exams online**, so that they have a better idea of their own level of preparation;
- It can increase **motivation** for improvement in the study, thanks also to the possibility of publishing one's own scores and comparing them with those of other participants.

These positive characteristics typical of e-learning, the researchers explain, may be the reason why the experimental group, which received online training, performed better than the control group in tests after the training treatment. In learning a foreign language, therefore, e-learning can also be an effective method, having demonstrated its capabilities in aiding reading comprehension and reading motivation. The study revealed how digital teaching could lead to favourable learning outcomes. "We can state," write the researchers, "that e-learning is an **essential tool** that should be used with face-to-face EFL lessons to supplement the curriculum" because it contains a variety of activities and materials that, in addition to not being present in traditional training, have the potential to "improve learners' language proficiency". The increasing development, dissemination and studies on e-learning demonstrate the evolution of the training world, which is increasingly using new technologies to enhance learning.

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