Engaging Students of Low Proficiency Level in Writing Classes by Using Wallwisher Tool

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ABSTRACT

Recent online development of learning tools such as Wallwisher can be used to enhance student engagement in the classroom especially in writing classes. Some problems encountered when teaching low proficiency students relate to the application of the knowledge gained in classrooms and to write more using this tool. Two categories of student engagement in classroom that work as the base for this study as outlined by McCarthy (2012) are self-interactions and student instructor interactions. Data were collected from 22 pre-diploma students who were enrolled in a business course and were obliged to pass an English course as a prerequisite for them to enroll in diploma courses. Students' levels of engagement were coded using Perkins and Murphy's (2006) instrument and later, four students were subjected to informal interview sessions for further investigation of phenomena.The responses recorded that they would be more participative and engaged with their learning materials and online technologies if they were being graded. It is vital to create active learning situations among the students which will assist them in applying the skills that they have learned in daily situations.

INTRODUCTION

New technologies provide us with better learning tools like Web 2.0 technology which can empower instructor visibility in the classroom. Many studies have been carried out all around the world which prove the effectiveness of this recent technology (Anzai, 2012; Aoki & Molanar, 2010). It is also suggested by Oakley (2012) that the use of Web 2.0 will increase student motivation and creativity in promoting the culture of independent learning, thus providing more opportunities for students to explore and gain knowledge from the virtual realm. Other scholars like Skocko (2012) also shared the same view that this technology will encourage student centered learning to cater for students' educational needs. The instructor plays a vital role to enliven the class environment and to assist in expanding the face-to-face learning situation. The creativity of the classroom instructor is important in implementing eclectic methods to integrate Web 2.0 elements in promoting more conducive, modern and futuristic teaching and learning (T & L) (Shabudin et al, 2014). For classes with large student numbers, correcting each and every single sentence of students' written assignments and tasks will be far from possible. Engaging students in online writing courses would be a good alternative to ensure their motivational level throughout the 14 weeks of the semester.

Jennings and Angelo (2006) have defined student course engagement as "the amount, type, and intensity of investment students make in their educational experiences" (p.6). Their definition concurs with Coates (2007) who viewed student engagement as "active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities" (p.122). This means that students' involvement in learning is enhanced with additional active interaction with academic staff and the university learning communities which include their peers. In looking at student engagement, Macquarie University (2009) stated that it is 'the extent or quality with which students are committed and actively involved in their learning'. It can be concluded that student engagement is the most important element in any learning environment and students need to be actively involved and participative in creating their own meaningful educational experiences.

Active learning as elaborated by Embi et al. (2012) involves i) the input or delivery of learning content ii) the process or learning activities iii) the output or learning evaluations. In making sure students are highly motivated to participate in learning activities, it is highly recommended that the more complex the learning activities are, that is, in terms of thought and effort, the greater the interaction with the content. This will then record a better result in greater retention of the course content materials. Aligning with this view, the researcher utilized both more traditional learning tools like 'Spell-it-Out-Loud' before implementing the more recent learning tool that is Wallwisher for the purpose of this research.

Wallwisher is a useful and advanced web-based tool which allows students to post their thoughts or responses on a particular topic or questions posed by the teacher using electronic sticky notes on a shared digital wall (Embi et al, 2012). The students would find it interesting as they can incorporate some images, audios and videos related to that particular topic. Students are required to click on appropriate web address links to access information and this tool is similar to other social media such as Facebook. The maximum number of characters on the electronic sticky notes is 160 which will ensure students' engagement in any topic in that particular class. Some of the ways how Wallwisher can be used to enhance learning is elaborated extensively by Embi et al. (2012) especially in writing classes, include brainstorming ideas on particular topics, assessing students' understanding of a concept in a formative manner, getting students to summarize their understanding of learning and allowing students to pose questions on areas that are still vague and unclear.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In locating theories on student engagement, the most significant framework which has its base in the United States lies in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2005a). This framework was the first explicit model of university student engagement and integrates widely accepted higher education practices and policies. Five dimensions are outlined in the framework; level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. An essential and adequate range of

the educationally important qualities of the university student experience has been captured in these dimensions.

Having conducted a study on campus based early year students' engagement in this study, Coates (2006) conceptualized nine qualities derived from that particular study: constructive teaching, supportive learning environments, teacher approachability, student and staff interaction, academic challenge, active learning, collaborative work, beyond class collaboration and complementary activities. In a more contemporary and recent campus based study, online learning is also being acknowledged and accepted as playing a formative role thus making Coates (2006) propose an additional seven qualities of the online dimensions of campus based study: online engagement, online active learning, online academic relevance, online teaching, online collaboration, online social interaction, and online contact with staff. The results from this study show that it provides an interpretive context for diagnosing and setting the benchmark for student engagement.

Recognizing that higher education is now embracing more digital communication often using online applications, it is undoubtedly important to utilize such applications to enhance reading and writing skills which can be supplemented with images, music, sound and graphics. These new applications are not aligned to our educational policies and national testing as the focus is more on skills related to reading of print based texts. This is the challenge for literacy educators to consider ways how digital technologies can be incorporated within classroom literacy and to what extent it can adhere to the educational policies and national testing. Looking at how essential rich, imaginative and cultural knowledge is, multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Unsworth, 2001; Healy 2008) are then viewed to be the crucial proficiencies for communication in a more modern world. This is an essential step to ensure student engagement in classroom activities while being cooperative and collaborative.

For this study, the model of multimodal literacy as represented by Walsh (2010) as shown in Figure 1 was used. It depicts the interrelationship between different texts, mediums and modes that includes traditional and digital features that tested all four skills; speaking, listening, reading and writing.
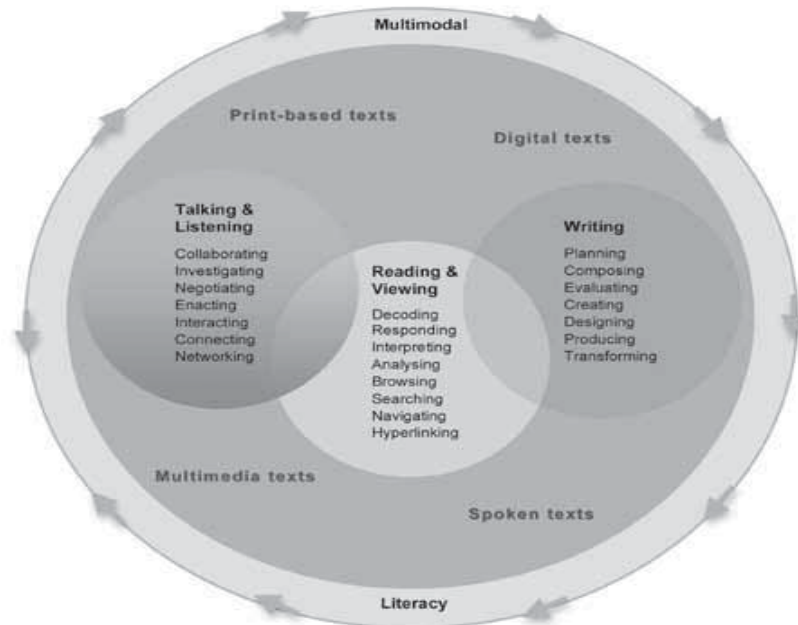
Figure 1: Multimodal Literacy in Classroom Contexts

The diagram shows the interchangeable resources such as spoken, print, digital, and multimedia texts that occur within the classroom settings as operating within the context of multimodal literacy. Students are first given some reading materials or even videos for them to respond to by writing about them. The three smaller circles within the diagram shows the interdependency and fluidity between these language skills and literacy practices. Specific terms are listed under the categories of talking and listening, reading and viewing and writing to demonstrate those practices that normally take place. Other terms are also proposed by Walsh (2010) to show further practices that happen in digital communication. The terms are not definitive but are useful as an initiative to demonstrate ways language and literacy practices work in developing further dimensions within new communication environments.

In this study, the researcher utilized theories on student engagement according to McCarthy (2012) who categorized two types which are; student with self interactions and students with instructor interactions. The first type

of interaction serves the students at the pre-stage sessions. For the first few weeks of the course, the instructor is expected to make the students feel at ease with the classroom environment and the way it is being conducted. It is a norm for Malaysian students to be quite passive for that period of time as they hardly know their classmates. They are normally shy to participate in classroom activities as they are afraid that their friends would laugh at them if they respond wrongly. The educators would probably opt for a simple and easy lesson to get the students thinking about any particular topic given using some of the terms from the introductory classes, and to get them to process all the information from the previous classes.

The second type of interaction is elaborated by McCarthy (2012) as observed to happen during formal and informal feedback. The learners can be given graded assignments that allow them to work on revision in this form of interaction. After few weeks of conducting lectures and tutorials with the students, they would surely have become comfortable with the classroom environment. Web 2.0 technologies like Wallwisher tool is then viewed as an appropriate online application that would allow students to share their thoughts about any particular topic that they have learned. The usage of this tool in teaching and learning will enhance students' confidence level to express their thoughts and ensure them that they are on the right track. All students enrolled in that course could then be given equitable treatment and no one would be left out or passive. A very straightforward example is the use of outlines for writing essays: "Create an outline of three idea charts to support the most important ways that we enhance our writing skills. Include a common, summary reflection." This assignment indicates how well the student has integrated the writing assignment into his or her understanding of the course topic.

The existence of these two types of interaction as outlined by McCarthy (2012) were observed in this study based on the data collected from 22 pre-diploma students focusing on the students' engagement in writing classes. They were enrolled for one semester with the minimum requirement of three credits in the Malaysian school leaving national examination *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (equivalent to the GSE O level) including *Bahasa Melayu* and had passed Mathematics and English. They were not offered any other places to further their studies at the tertiary level. They were obliged to pass the English course at the pre-diploma level as a prerequisite for entry

into diploma level courses. These students' English language proficiency level was considered to be weak with only a few of them who could write well in the class. This study aimed to investigate the literacy strategies that the students needed to master writing skills with multimodal texts and to identify the most appropriate pedagogy for a more current approach to teaching writing to these students. Across different curriculum areas, educators can work to develop integrated programs combining all needed skills like responding to viewing, writing and producing texts.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, students' levels of engagement were coded using Perkins and Murphy's (2006) model. The rubric measures individual engagement in an online discussion on a particular topic or lesson. This model is deemed satisfactory to cater for both asynchronous and synchronous modes of communication for different levels of engagement, as illustrated by students' varying levels of critical thinking questions and comments.

Table 1: Perkins and Murphy's (2006) Model in Identifying Engagement in Critical Thinking

Engagement Category	Indicators				
Clarification: All aspects of stating, clarifying, describing (but not explaining), or defining the issue being discussed.	Proposes an issue for debate.	Analyzes, negotiates, or discusses the meaning of the issue.	Identifies one or more underlying assumptions in a statement in the discussion.	Identifies relationships among the statements or assumptions.	Defines or criticizes the definition of relevant terms.
Assessment: Evaluating some aspect of the debate; making judgments on a situation, proposing evidence for an argument or for links with other issues.	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is valid.	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is relevant.	Specifies assessment criteria, such as the credibility of the source.	Makes a value judgment on the assessment criteria or a situation or topic.	Gives evidence for choice of assessment criteria.

Inference: Showing connections among ideas; drawing appropriate conclusions by deduction or induction, generalizing, explaining (but not describing), and hypothesizing.	Makes appropriate deductions.	Makes appropriate inferences.	Arrives at a conclusion.	Makes generalizations.	Deduces relationships among ideas.
Strategies: Proposing, discussing, or evaluating possible actions.	Takes action.	Describes possible actions.	Evaluates possible actions.	Predicts outcomes of proposed actions.	

The goal of this study is to provide a meaningful learning experience for the students who enrolled in a writing course. Data was obtained from students (n=22) at the researcher's university in Penang, Malaysia. Going by the students' school based national exam results, the researcher had already established that the level of the students' proficiency was low and the expectation should not be as high as with diploma students. The syllabus for this batch of students tested all the four skills but the focus was more on reading. The final skill which is writing was embedded in the more complex and difficult level of the lesson by using Wallwisher tool. The researcher collected the data on weeks 3, 6, 9 and 12 of the semester. The reason for the data collection in these four weeks was because reading and writing (as the post-activity) classes were held on these weeks. The students had critical reading practice which would then be applied in the writing activities in weeks 1, 2, 4 and 5. In weeks 3 and 6, the students were given texts and required to do a post activity of "Spell-it-Out-Loud" to enhance their vocabulary and to work in pairs to write an outline. This component, writing an outline, would be tested during the on-going assessment. This activity was conducted using the traditional approach to make the students feel more comfortable with the classroom environment. Bearing in mind that this group of students were experiencing classes in university for the first time, they were given easier and 'less-threatening' activities. Below are the two tables that show the observations made on the levels of engagement in weeks 3 and 6 of the semester for the pre-diploma classes.

Table 2: Testing the Students' Understanding on the Reading Text (Unit 3)

Engagement Category	Clarification: All aspects of stating, clarifying, describing (but not explaining), or defining the issue being discussed.				
Explanation	Proposes an issue for debate.	Analyzes, negotiates, or discusses the meaning of the issue.	Identifies one or more underlying assumptions in a statement in the discussion.	Identifies relationships among the statements or assumptions.	Defines or criticizes the definition of relevant terms.
Number of students:				4	18
Engagement category	**Assessment:** Evaluating some aspects of the debate; making judgments on a situation, proposing evidence for an argument or for links with other issues				
Explanation	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is valid.	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is relevant.	Specifies assessment criteria, such as the credibility of the source.	Makes a value judgment on the assessment criteria or a situation or topic.	Gives evidence for choice of assessment criteria.
Number of students				2	20
Engagement Category					hypothesizing
Explanation	Makes appropriate deductions.	Makes appropriate inferences.	Arrives at a conclusion.	Makes generalizations.	Deduces relationships among ideas.
Number of students				2	20
Engagement Category	**Strategies:** Proposing, discussing, or evaluating possible actions				
Explanation	Takes action.	Describes possible actions.	Evaluates possible actions.	Predicts outcomes of proposed actions.	
Number of students		3	19		

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Table 3: Testing on the Students' Understanding on the Reading Text (Unit 6)

Engagement Category	Clarification: All aspects of stating, clarifying, describing (but not explaining), or defining the issue being discussed.				
Explanation	Proposes an issue for debate.	Analyzes, negotiates, or discusses the meaning of the issue.	Identifies one or more underlying assumptions in a statement in the discussion.	Identifies relationships among the statements or assumptions.	Defines or criticizes the definition of relevant terms.
Number of students:				6	16
Engagement category	Assessment: Evaluating some aspects of the debate; making judgments on a situation, proposing evidence for an argument or for links with other issues				
Explanation	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is valid.	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is relevant.	Specifies assessment criteria, such as the credibility of the source.	Makes a value judgment on the assessment criteria or a situation or topic.	Gives evidence for choice of assessment criteria.
Number of students				4	18
Engagement Category					hypothesizing
Explanation	Makes appropriate deductions.	Makes appropriate inferences.	Arrives at a conclusion.	Makes generalizations.	Deduces relationships among ideas.
Number of students				3	19
Engagement Category	Strategies: Proposing, discussing, or evaluating possible actions				
Explanation	Takes action.	Describes possible actions.	Evaluates possible actions.	Predicts outcomes of proposed actions.	
Number of students		5	17		

Based on these two tables, the researcher plotted in the number of students who had engaged in the categories of clarification, assessment, inference and strategies. The majority of the students fell under least

engaged for all the categories. They were not that critical in reading and not analytical in their writing as well. The activities required a long duration to be completed in order to ensure every student could be tested on the 'Spell-it-Out-Loud" activity and also to present their outline in pairs in front of the class. It was observed that the students who had completed their presentation did not focus on their friends' presentation. While waiting for their turn, some pairs were busy preparing themselves memorizing words and discussing their outlines with their partners. Plotting the numbers into these categories was done based on the researcher's perception and limited to the researcher's capability to listen to several pairs' discussion. Hence, the researcher might have missed out on important points in their discussion. When the researcher attempted to have a class discussion on the topic, the students hardly responded which is why the researcher got the students to work in pairs and and participate in the 'Spell-it-Out-Loud' and writing an outline activity.

The scenario differed for weeks 9 and 12 as the students were involved in Web 2.0 technology using the Wallwisher application. It was easy to spot how participative they were in this activity conducted in the classroom. The researcher initiated a synchronous discussion just to make sure everyone paid attention to the activity and to give opportunities to all participants to actively voice their thoughts and opinions. This can be seen from the pop-up notes on the wall which got responses from others who wanted to share their point of view and who had not been part of the discussion.

Table 4: Testing on the Students' Understanding on the Reading Text (Unit 9)

Engagement Category	Clarification: All aspects of stating, clarifying, describing (but not explaining), or defining the issue being discussed.				
Explanation	Proposes an issue for debate.	Analyzes, negotiates, or discusses the meaning of the issue.	Identifies one or more underlying assumptions in a statement in the discussion.	Identifies relationships among the statements or assumptions.	Defines or criticizes the definition of relevant terms.
Number of students:			2	6	14
Engagement category	**Assessment:** Evaluating some aspects of the debate; making judgments on a situation, proposing evidence for an argument or for links with other issues				
Explanation	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is valid.	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is relevant.	Specifies assessment criteria, such as the credibility of the source.	Makes a value judgment on the assessment criteria or a situation or topic.	Gives evidence for choice of assessment criteria.
Number of students			1	5	16
Engagement Category					hypothesizing
Explanation	Makes appropriate deductions.	Makes appropriate inferences.	Arrives at a conclusion.	Makes generalizations.	Deduces relationships among ideas.
Number of students			2	8	12
Engagement Category	**Strategies:** Proposing, discussing, or evaluating possible actions				
Explanation	Takes action.	Describes possible actions.	Evaluates possible actions.	Predicts outcomes of proposed actions.	
Number of students	4	8	10		

Table 5: Testing on the Students' Understanding on the Reading Text (Unit 12)

Engagement Category	Clarification: All aspects of stating, clarifying, describing (but not explaining), or defining the issue being discussed.				
Explanation	Proposes an issue for debate.	Analyzes, negotiates, or discusses the meaning of the issue.	Identifies one or more underlying assumptions in a statement in the discussion.	Identifies relationships among the statements or assumptions.	Defines or criticizes the definition of relevant terms.
Number of students:		1	3	6	12
Engagement category	**Assessment:** Evaluating some aspects of the debate; making judgments on a situation, proposing evidence for an argument or for links with other issues				
Explanation	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is valid.	Provides or asks for reasons that proffered evidence is relevant.	Specifies assessment criteria, such as the credibility of the source.	Makes a value judgment on the assessment criteria or a situation or topic.	Gives evidence for choice of assessment criteria.
Number of students			3	5	14
Engagement Category					hypothesizing
Explanation	Makes appropriate deductions.	Makes appropriate inferences.	Arrives at a conclusion.	Makes generalizations.	Deduces relationships among ideas.
Number of students		2	3	6	11
Engagement Category	**Strategies:** Proposing, discussing, or evaluating possible actions				
Explanation	Takes action.	Describes possible actions.	Evaluates possible actions.	Predicts outcomes of proposed actions.	
Number of students	1	4	7	10	

All the four tables indicate the analysis of the discussion in determining various levels of student-to-student engagement in more traditional and current ways using Wallwisher tool. Increasing numbers of student

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engagement according to Perkins and Murphy's (2006) model shows the preference of students for using more recent technology like Web 2.0 tool in their learning. The notes appearing at the Wall generated during the synchronous teaching observations were analyzed in a similar manner using content analysis. The researcher had conducted an independent analysis of the data to decide the level of students' engagement in their responses during discussion.

As for further investigation for this study, the researcher used a qualitative design incorporating learning and research influenced by UKLA *Reading on Screen Report* (Bearne et al., 2007). That survey had investigated students' literacy activities outside the school in order to consider how these activities might be impacting on students' literacy learning in school. Thus, the researcher used this model to observe if a similar trend occurred in first year university students with low proficiency level but who had become familiar with digital texts. Some digital and mobile technology like instant messaging, online gaming and social networking are technological applications that could enhance student engagement in classroom activities. This relates to the challenges that educators need to face in maintaining students' motivation to engage in learning activities. Thus, to obtain some response on this issue, four students were selected to participate in informal interview sessions. Some of the responses are summarized in the table below.

Table 6: Responses from the Informal Interview Sessions

Students' responses about their feelings and suggestions in conducting classroom activities
1. They prefer reading for entertainment and not for academic purposes.
2. The reading texts could possibly include some images and be colorful together with some movements. (online version)
3. The reading texts should use simple language and can be understood easily.
4. To do more role play activities from the reading texts.
5. To have complete facility so that all of them can have online discussion in that particular class.
6. They will be more confident if they can record the materials to be presented and to be more prepared.
7. To have in pairwork as to allow them to discuss before posting at the Wall in Wallwisher.

8. To be able to get to know the correct answer or view of their lecturer in Wallwisher.
9. Letting them know that activities from reading texts are being tested and graded.
10. Reward them with permission to play online games after they have finished their work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study contributes to higher education research by developing a study of pre-diploma student engagement. The data calls for the needs of literacy to be redefined within current curriculum contexts. In order to retrieve information from the reading texts, the students were seen to investigate and apply strategies to solve language activities by using images and sounds and some keywords given. They were observed to successfully apply their understanding to obtain information online even more than in printed texts. This is what Walsh (2010) claims as 'orchestrating the different modes to make meaning'. This scholar's opinion concurs with Lawless and Schrader (2008) who presented insights into the processes of navigating hypermedia in cyberspace environments using both intertextual and intratextual characteristics. Understanding how we read on screen especially utilizing Web 2.0 technology like Wallwisher includes the process of responding to animated icons, hypertext or hyperlink, and sound effects while dealing with the aspect of continuity in pathways between and within screens for internet and intranet.

In order to understand how online experiences play a critical role in contemporary campus-based learning, Coates (2006) reflected on three main dimensions that show how first year students engaged online. The first dimension refers to web and computer software usage with the aim of supporting learning and accessing resources. Meanwhile, the second dimension focuses on the role of ICT in facilitating more independent and self-initiated learning which contrasts with the final dimension of online engagement which aims for communicating and building communities using ICTs. This study can be categorized within the first dimension as outlined by Coates (2006). This is because the students' engagement in this study was only limited to accessing the video linked to Wallwisher and to respond to the application of the Web 2.0 technology. For future research, students

with a higher proficiency level can be studied, where they are allowed to explore the second and third dimensions as in encouraging them to work more independently and even to communicate among themselves and create their own community.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A thorough analysis of the data from the coded model by Perkins and Murphy's (2006) and informal interview sessions with the targeted students presents the Malaysian perspective on student engagement especially in using online learning tools with the focus on very low proficiency level first year university students. This study directs attention to the importance of developing a broader comprehension on engagement and to redefine and reshape policy and practice in accordance with the syllabus and to consider demographic factors with the changes that the students will face over time through their undergraduate studies.

The skill of responding prior to the reading texts provided by the instructor in the class can be seen from the language production in terms of how they write about their views and comments using Wallwisher application. It was observed that the students interacted with texts together with the other students and also their instructor. Being literate is not only limited to being able to read, understand and write but is also essential for online interaction skill. This includes multisensory activities as mentioned by Walsh (2010) as "searching, viewing, browsing, scrolling and navigating together with clicking and scrolling of a mouse, responding to animated icons, hypertext, sound effects, and the continuous pathways between and within screens".

The findings from this study reveal some important points that require reconsideration when structuring and implementing a syllabus in the classroom. It is vital to create active learning situations among the students to assist them to apply the skills that they have learned. Active learning is the key to success and this can be achieved if we continue to blend the more current and traditional approaches in the teaching and learning process. The most important consideration for instructors is the need to adapt classroom communication with digital communication practices

outside allocated classroom periods in order for this to be significant in the future for the students. The biggest challenge that instructors might have to deal with will be to incorporate digital communication technologies that cover basic aspects as mentioned by Walsh (2010) as reading, writing, language learning, grammar, spelling and punctuation. All of these language elements are being tested in the syllabus of the course taught, thus, we need to consider their incorporation into curriculum setting to be aligned with our teaching and assessment. The key point of educating our youngsters is basically not just to have them reproduce the language being taught but to ensure that they can participate actively in their learning and become part of the communicative society.

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