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Weaving a Bond between the Teacher and the Taught: Using 'Voice Thread' as Digital App for ESL Learners

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Abstract

Education in this digitalized world has witnessed many a roller coaster rides. The revolution brought about by digital technology has affected the education sector to completely change the face of conventional teaching and learning. With the spate in the use of digital apps in the academic arena, the self-paced and personalized learning and the concept of teachers as 'new learners' has apparently challenged the role of both the teacher and the taught. Furthermore, the stage set for 'online' teaching during COVID 19 pandemic acted as a catalyst which resulted post-COVID in innovative strategies in teaching like blended learning, hybrid learning etc. Mobile phones, laptops and other similar devices became connecting links between the teachers and learners even outside the classroom. Learners of English as second language were exposed to digital apps to enhance their language skills, but lacked the expertise for deriving maximum benefit. The challenge for teachers put them in the category of 'new learners' in using these apps for effective teaching learning environment.

In addition to the problems faced by second language learners to express their thoughts and ideas in speech, the challenge of teaching effective oral communication has always been a matter of concern for the teachers. In the Indian scenario, the level of learners is so varied and diverse that creating a common teaching platform becomes difficult. Also, learning gets hampered due to students' anxiety, hesitancy and lack of interaction. 'Voice Thread' as a digital app presents flexibility features which are student centered and learner friendly. Besides the learners using the app to record, upload and share their audios, the teachers could also become a connecting link to motivate their efforts and improve and enhance their speaking skills. The paper is an attempt to bring Voice thread to be effectively used in Indian classrooms for teaching effective oral communication.

Keywords: Digital Apps, New Learners, Voice Thread, Challenges, Effective Communication, Learner Friendly.

Introduction

In an era dominated by technological advancements, the landscape of education is continually evolving. Digital tools have become integral components in the educational framework, reshaping traditional approaches to teaching and learning. As educators grapple with the ever-changing dynamics of the modern classroom, the incorporation of technology stands out as a transformative force. Among the myriad of digital tools, Voice Thread emerges as a promising avenue for revolutionizing the English classroom experience.

The proliferation of digital tools in education has significantly altered the dynamics of knowledge dissemination. From interactive whiteboards to virtual classrooms, technology has transcended traditional boundaries, offering educators innovative avenues to engage students in the learning process. As the digital realm becomes increasingly intertwined with education, the role of technology in enhancing teaching and learning experiences cannot be overstated. Yet, despite the surge in technological integration, traditional English classrooms grapple with persistent challenges. The conventional methods of instruction often fall short in capturing the attention and enthusiasm of today's students. Recognizing these challenges prompts a critical examination of pedagogical strategies, urging educators to explore innovative approaches that align with the digital age. This study seeks to dig deep into the realm of digital humanities, focusing on the application of Voice Thread in English classrooms. By exploring the utilization of Voice Thread, it aims to assess its impact on teaching methodologies, learning experiences, and ultimately, student outcomes. The purpose is twofold: to unravel the potential benefits of integrating Voice Thread into the English curriculum and to gauge its influence on enhancing student engagement and academic achievement.

Within the vast and dynamic intersection of education and technology, this study sets out to explore the transformative potential of Voice Thread in English classrooms. Against the backdrop of a digital age, where the integration of technology has largely become synonymous with progressive pedagogy, the inquiry aims to address the challenges embedded in traditional English classrooms. The significance of this exploration lies in unraveling the potential benefits of integrating Voice Thread as a digital humanities tool, examining how it may breathe new life into teaching methodologies. Moreover, by probing into the impact of Voice Thread on student engagement and outcomes, the paper seeks to contribute nuanced insights that extend beyond the realm of digital tools alone. It also tries to understand, not just the functionality of Voice Thread in English education but also its role in fostering an environment where learning becomes an engaging and enriching endeavor. In doing so, it aspires to pave the way for innovative pedagogical strategies that can redefine the landscape of English classrooms.

‘Adaptive Learning Platforms’, AI and the Use of Authentic Language

The concept of adaptive learning platforms has gained prominence in the realm of language education, with ongoing research focusing on tailoring language learning experiences to individual needs. Voice Thread, positioned as a dynamic site within this landscape, exemplifies the potential for personalization in ESL learning. For instance, consider an ESL learner who excels in written communication but struggles with oral proficiency. Voice Thread, as an adaptive platform, can identify this discrepancy and offer tailored activities that specifically target oral language skills. This adaptability ensures that each learner receives a customized and targeted language acquisition journey.

Furthermore, Voice Thread's dynamic nature allows it to adapt not only to individual learning styles but also to real-world contexts. In the pursuit of authentic language use, learners are exposed to a variety of language expressions, accents, and contemporary usage. For instance, a Voice Thread activity may involve analyzing a video clip where native speakers engage in everyday conversations, exposing learners to authentic colloquial expressions and regional accents. By immersing ESL learners in real-world language contexts, Voice Thread transcends traditional language learning methods and provides an enriched linguistic experience.

In this way, Voice Thread serves as more than just a platform for language exercises; it becomes a dynamic space that adapts to the unique needs of each learner while exposing them to the authenticity of language as it is naturally spoken and used in diverse contexts. The adaptability of Voice Thread ensures that ESL learners receive a personalized language learning experience,

catering to their strengths and addressing areas that need improvement, all within the backdrop of authentic language use.

Introduction to the App

During the past few years, computer scientists have designed several Web 2.0 tools to help users collaborate, communicate and create content that can be used online and offline. Using different inquiry frameworks, researchers have examined the use of a popular Web 2.0 tool – Voice Thread in establishing its immense potential in integrating teacher education. VT is an asynchronous online discussion board with audio/video capabilities that helps promote student engagement and collaboration at different levels. A research report of the European Commission mentions Web 2.0 as ‘a practical option for teachers to grow professionally at a personal level’. Santosh Mahapatra in his article titled “Using Web 2.0 tools for teacher professional development: a case study” suggests that Web 2.0 enabled online teacher education holds great potential in ESL context in countries like India but requires more research towards its induction and effective use. With India being the third largest user of the Internet in the world, the use of VT can be a viable option. Articles and research papers by educators who have effectively used VT in different ways in their teaching methodology is more common abroad than in India. Despite the flexibility of VT as a digital tool and its accessibility on mobile phones, awareness of its use within the Indian education context is found lacking.

Voice Thread operates as an innovative multimedia platform, allowing users to create interactive discussions and presentations enriched with voice, video, text, and image elements. Users initiate projects by incorporating various media, and participants engage in dynamic, asynchronous discussions through voice and video comments. The user interface features a central media player and threaded comment streams, facilitating a seamless and interactive experience. With controls for access and permissions, users can easily share their Voice Thread projects, embedding them in websites or integrating them into educational platforms. This cloud-based platform is compatible with various devices, making it accessible to a broad user base. Educators can leverage Voice Thread for assignments and assessments, providing a unique space for students to showcase their understanding and communication skills. The platform continuously evolves with updates and improvements to enhance its functionality.

In an English as a Second Language (ESL) environment, Voice Thread holds immense potential for language learners. The platform’s emphasis on oral communication can provide ESL students with a dynamic space to practice and refine their speaking skills. The integration of voice comments allows for authentic language expression, enabling learners to work on pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. Furthermore, the flexibility of asynchronous discussions accommodates diverse learning styles and time zones, ensuring that ESL students can participate at their own pace. Voice Thread’s multimedia capabilities offer a multi-sensory approach, catering to visual and auditory learners, and its collaborative features encourage language exchange and peer-to-peer learning. ESL educators can leverage Voice Thread to create engaging language activities, encourage authentic conversations, and provide targeted feedback to enhance language acquisition in a digital and interactive setting.

In the Indian scenario students from different states and from various socio-cultural backgrounds, face problems of mother tongue interference which in turn affects the learners speech and acquiring of correct pronunciation. Due to lack of exposure in speaking English in their educational setup, these students at times are unable to cope with the stress of communicating and expressing themselves in English. They fail to actively participate in classroom discussions and hesitate to ask questions. Their role as passive learners inhibits their learning and there is no positive outcome

from their presence in class. Richards and Renandya (2002) have stated that a large number of the world's language learners study English to develop proficiency in speaking. Ironically, students who have not been exposed to speaking the language from their kinder-garden stage find it difficult to learn this skill and therefore hesitate to speak English at higher levels of their studies. AMU is no exception, with students preferring to use their mother tongue rather than the target language not only outside their class but also amongst themselves during class. It is also still accepted by the learners that in the so called class discussions, it's the teacher who must do most of the talking and they participate simply as passive listeners.

In such settings where learners' shyness and lack of confidence hinders their participation in class, various factors have been found to affect their learning. Language learning is not only affected by individual factors but can also be affected by social or cultural factors of learning. Sokip (2020) points out the inseparability of language learning skills and aspects of education such as role of teacher, teaching method, infrastructure of the institution etc. Raja and Selvi,(2011) found environment, attitudes and teachers' competence as the major factors of learning difficulties. They further stressed upon the importance of creating a conducive environment in the classroom focusing on students' learning needs abilities.

Benefits for Students

Voice thread is designed to promote multiple learning styles and therefore, can help achieve a greater level of success in ESL class. The 24x7 access to VT not only boosts the morale of the learners but also increases their level of participation in activities to improve their speaking skills. Unlike the conventional classroom setting where all students do not get to speak, with VT, ESL students can practice speaking as many times as they like before confidently sharing with their teachers and classmates. Learning also takes place by listening to other students speak in English on topics relevant to their age and experience. With VT students feel a sense of being part of a community, sharing a special bond with their teacher and their peers even outside the class. Using VT to preview a topic acts as ice breaking technique in making students respond; even those who remain quiet or shy in the class. Moreover, since VT allows for the media to be used at will for discussions, uploading power point slides and adding explanatory notes would invite students to discuss and comment as they work through the narrated lecture.

Benefits for Teachers

In a heterogenous class with multilingual speakers, teachers in using English orally to communicate with students may at times fail to deliver their intended message to some students. The potential disconnect between what the teacher says and what the students hear can be taken care of by VT. The teacher can repeat and explain the message more clearly using simple language to students who have difficulty in following the instructions. Students could be asked to be mindful of tones when trying to get a message across. Teachers can prepare students to get oriented to the topic to be discussed. Teachers can ensure that students get to develop the sense that they are making progress. They can also get them to compare their own work at different stages of learning. Teachers can also make students work on group presentations. VT can be used as a medium to bridge and share cultural aspects across the country and across the world.

With Artificial Intelligence taking the centre stage of almost every aspect of human existence, use of digital technique and easy to use apps like VT appears as obligatory to prepare our teaching-learning community to prepare to meet future challenges of this digital world.

Assessment and Feedback in ESL Learning

In a conventional ESL classroom, gauging students' language proficiency often involves a combination of written exams and oral assessments. Now, envision a scenario where a Voice Thread discussion replaces a traditional oral examination. ESL students are given a prompt related to a recent lesson, such as expressing their opinions on a current news article. Each student records their response using Voice Thread, allowing the teacher to not only evaluate pronunciation, grammar, and fluency but also to delve into the nuances of language use. For instance, a student might demonstrate a strong grasp of vocabulary but struggle with verb conjugation. The teacher, using Voice Thread's dynamic commenting features, can insert voice or text feedback precisely at the point of difficulty, offering targeted guidance for improvement. This immediate and personalized feedback loop enhances the learning experience by addressing individual challenges in real-time, fostering a more adaptive and supportive ESL learning environment.

Voice Thread as a Dynamic Site in ESL Pedagogy

Now, let's consider an ESL class project where students explore cultural aspects through short stories. Voice Thread becomes the dynamic hub for this collaborative endeavor. Students read the story and, instead of submitting written analyses, they engage in a multimedia discussion on Voice Thread. They share text comments to express their interpretations, but more uniquely, they use audio responses to articulate their thoughts, allowing for the development of oral communication skills. This multimodal communication not only caters to diverse learning styles but also enables students to reinforce their language skills through different channels. Moreover, the collaborative nature of Voice Thread extends beyond the classroom. ESL learners can connect with peers from different parts of the world, sharing their analyses, discussing cultural nuances, and gaining insights into varied language expressions. This global connectivity transforms the ESL classroom into a vibrant, interconnected space, fostering a sense of community among learners engaged in the authentic exploration of language.

In these scenarios, Voice Thread emerges as a transformative tool, revolutionizing traditional assessment methods and redefining ESL pedagogy. The immediacy and personalization of feedback empower students to address specific language challenges, promoting a more efficient and tailored language learning journey. Simultaneously, the dynamic and collaborative features of Voice Thread contribute to a rich and immersive ESL pedagogical experience, where learners engage with language in diverse ways and connect with a global community. The everyday use of Voice Thread in these examples transcends the limitations of traditional approaches, emphasizing the potential of this dynamic platform to reshape and elevate ESL learning experiences.

Voice Thread and Other Similar Digital Pedagogical Tools

Voice Thread emerges as a dynamic and adaptable digital tool with notable strengths in language education, particularly for its multimodal communication features. Imagine an ESL classroom where students use Voice Thread to engage in a discussion about a literary text. They can leave text comments for written analysis, record audio responses to express their thoughts, and even share video commentary, creating a comprehensive and interactive language learning experience. The platform's adaptability becomes evident when a language teacher tailors activities based on individual needs, such as assigning specific tasks for pronunciation practice to students who may require additional support in that area.

When compared to Flipgrid, a video-focused discussion platform, Voice Thread's multimodal capabilities offer a more comprehensive learning experience. In a scenario where students are discussing cultural nuances, Voice Thread allows for a richer exchange by incorporating text, audio,

and video, accommodating different learning preferences. While Flipgrid may excel in simplicity and ease of use, it may fall short in providing the depth of interaction and engagement offered by Voice Thread.

In another instance, consider a collaborative project on Padlet, where students share written responses to a prompt. Voice Thread surpasses Padlet in adaptability by allowing students not only to contribute written comments but also to express their ideas through audio and video recordings. This flexibility caters to diverse learning styles and ensures a more personalized language learning journey. While Padlet's drag-and-drop interface is user-friendly, its limitations in multimedia interaction become apparent when compared to Voice Thread's more robust features.

Edpuzzle, with its focus on interactive video lessons, may excel in certain scenarios, such as teaching pronunciation through video clips. However, Voice Thread offers a broader range of possibilities by supporting various media types, including text-based discussions and collaborative projects. In an ESL class where students are exploring real-world language expressions, Voice Thread's adaptability shines as it can seamlessly integrate text, audio, and video, creating a more immersive language learning environment.

In summary, Voice Thread's strengths lie in its multimodal communication, adaptability, and dynamic collaboration features. Its ability to provide a comprehensive language learning experience, foster global connections, and adjust to individual needs positions it as a valuable asset in language education. While each platform has its merits, the choice ultimately hinges on educators' and learners' specific goals and preferences, with Voice Thread offering a versatile and engaging solution for diverse pedagogical settings.

Teaching Language by Integrating Memes and Socio-cultural Discourses

In ESL classrooms, memes can be instrumental in engaging students with contemporary discourses and socio-cultural debates, fostering language proficiency while offering a lens into cultural nuances. For instance, a meme related to gender equality or feminism could feature a succinct image or caption, providing a springboard for discussions on cultural perspectives on gender roles and societal expectations. By deconstructing the meme, students not only analyze language usage but also delve into the underlying socio-cultural themes.

Consider a meme addressing climate change, featuring a witty caption and striking visuals. ESL learners can dissect the language used to convey urgency, explore the humor embedded in the meme, and then extend the discussion to encompass global perspectives on environmental issues. This not only enhances language skills but also encourages critical thinking about socio-cultural debates transcending geographical boundaries.

Furthermore, memes can serve as windows into contemporary language usage, slang, and expressions. A meme capturing a popular internet trend or a viral moment becomes a language-learning tool, helping students navigate informal language and understand the cultural context that gave rise to the meme.

In this way, memes become catalysts for broader conversations within ESL classrooms. They enable educators to infuse lessons with real-world, current discourses, making language learning a dynamic and culturally relevant experience. The use of memes not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also cultivates a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural fabric that shapes language use on a global scale.

Challenges in Integrating Voice Thread as an ESL Tool in India

In the context of incorporating Voice Thread as a tool for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in India, several hurdles and challenges emerge, necessitating careful consideration for

successful integration. Limited internet connectivity in certain regions and disparities in access to personal computing devices may impede the seamless use of this online platform, particularly outside traditional classroom settings. Diverse linguistic backgrounds in India pose challenges related to adapting to a standardized English accent, impacting both comprehension and spoken English skills. Cultural sensitivities, including privacy concerns in discussing personal topics, require a delicate balance in fostering open communication. Additionally, addressing digital literacy challenges among both educators and learners, coupled with the need for comprehensive training, becomes imperative for effective adoption. Adapting assessment methods to evaluate spoken English skills and ensuring fairness in evaluation across diverse linguistic backgrounds present further hurdles. Institutional infrastructure, budgetary constraints, and the imperative to align the tool with existing curricular objectives also demand careful consideration. Mitigating these challenges necessitates a collaborative and strategic approach, involving educators, administrators, and technology support staff to navigate the complexities of integrating Voice Thread successfully into the ESL curriculum in India.

Conclusion

In the ever-evolving landscape of education dominated by technological advancements, the infusion of digital tools has redefined traditional teaching methodologies. Amid this transformation, Voice Thread emerges as a beacon, promising to revolutionize the English classroom experience. This exploration has ventured into the dynamic intersection of technology and education, emphasizing the pivotal role of Voice Thread in addressing challenges within traditional English classrooms. From adaptive learning platforms to authentic language use, this study delved into the transformative potential of Voice Thread.

Voice Thread thus, as an innovative pedagogical tool, unfolds its manifold applications within the English classroom across diverse domains. Facilitating dynamic and interactive book discussions, students harness Voice Thread to dissect specific chapters or themes from novels. Through the medium of audio comments, learners articulate their analyses, thoughts, and queries, nurturing a natural and engaging conversation that transcends traditional textual interactions. Its departure from traditional teaching pedagogy not only accommodates diverse learning styles but also encourages a more nuanced exploration of communication skills.

However, amidst the enthusiasm for the potential benefits of Voice Thread in ESL education, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent uncertainties surrounding its success. The theoretical groundwork and comparisons with other tools provide a foundation, but the true test lies in empirical evidence derived from primary data. To comprehensively evaluate the impact of Voice Thread, a robust research methodology employing mixed methods is imperative. This involves gathering real-time feedback from educators and students, measuring engagement levels, and assessing academic outcomes through both quantitative and qualitative lenses. Triangulation of various data sources, helps navigate the uncertainties and intricacies surrounding the adoption of Voice Thread in ESL classrooms. As we chart the future of ESL education, the need for rigorous testing and validation becomes paramount, ensuring that the promises of innovation and transformation are substantiated by tangible evidence. The journey explored herein sets the stage for a paradigm shift, championing innovative pedagogical strategies, yet recognizing the importance of empirical scrutiny in shaping the trajectory of Voice Thread's impact on English classrooms in the digital age.

Voice Thread thus emerges as an invaluable tool for public speaking practice, fostering a less intimidating environment for students to record and share speeches. The collaborative potential of Voice Thread is evidenced in the creation of digital storytelling projects and collaborative storytelling endeavors. Furthermore, Voice Thread's adaptability to instructional contexts is

underscored by its role as an interactive platform. For example, ESL Teachers can craft interactive grammar modules where students can listen to explanations, and actively participate in grammar exercises, and receive feedback in a multimedia format, thereby offering a comprehensive and engaging approach to language structure.

The platform's capacity for cultural exploration is exemplified as students share information about their cultures or present research on different cultures, utilizing multimedia elements to promote cultural awareness and understanding. Similarly, Voice Thread finds application in poetry readings, where students perform and record readings, exploring the rhythmic intricacies, tones, and emotions embedded within poetic expression.

In the realm of debates and discussions, Voice Thread facilitates online discourse on diverse topics, providing students with a platform to express opinions and engage in thoughtful exchanges. This virtual forum extends the boundaries of traditional classroom discourse, fostering an inclusive and participatory learning environment.

In summation, the integration of Voice Thread into the English classroom transcends conventional pedagogy, offering a versatile and comprehensive tool that caters to diverse learning styles. Through its varied applications, Voice Thread emerges as a catalyst for student engagement, collaboration, and skill development, positioning itself at the forefront of innovative language education methodologies.

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