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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EFFECT OF USING POWTOON ON LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

***Charbel Semaan and Nour Ismail**

Lebanese University, Faculty of Education, Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to test the effectiveness of using PowToon in classroom where students learn English as a foreign language (EFL). After the researchers noticed problems in comprehending new concepts due to poor language skills, PowToon seemed a great tool to both promote active reading and engagement and integrate project-based learning (PBL). The implementation of the study has showed positive effects on the learners' level of engagement, comprehension and developing reading strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The invasion of technology in our lives has made us reform many things in our daily routine through the past few years. Education and knowledge acquisition are part of this era; students native to technology need to gain technology literacy skills to be effective 21st century citizens. Notwithstanding, teachers can opt for hundreds of digital applications available on the web to help students accomplish their goals while taking learners' needs and other contextual factors into consideration. Liu *et al.*, (2014) present a study that shows the mobile learning advantages using cell phones and tablets addressing several learning styles to support the students' improvisation and innovation. Moreover, Lancellot (2017) found that K-12 students and teachers had a positive experience in incorporating digital technology, as these implementations increased the students' engagement and contributed to teachers' professional development.

Problematic: In this study, the researchers noticed that students learning EFL has experienced problems in comprehending new concepts due to poor listening skills and other language problems. Therefore, they searched for ways for designing effective visual and auditory aids that keep learners focused and at the same time facilitate comprehension through learning reading strategies.

***Corresponding author: Charbel Semaan,**
Lebanese University, Faculty of Education, Lebanon.

Accordingly, the researchers chose the digital application PowToon that proved to be a great tool for easily designing such aids, so they wanted to test the effectiveness of this web 2.0 tool in EFL classes and the possibility of using it in project-based learning.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Using "PowToon" for Learning English as a foreign language has a positive effect on the students' level of engagement, comprehension and learning reading strategies. Thus, PowToon is a useful digital tool for EFL students.
Hypothesis 0: Using "PowToon" for Learning English as a foreign language has a negative or no effect on the students' level of engagement, comprehension and learning reading strategies. Thus, PowToon tools cannot be used with EFL students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology in Education

Technology integration in education has become necessary, especially when we are dealing with "digital natives" that are expected to progress in performance, collaboration, academic achievement and engagement through using technological tools in class. As Sarkar, Ford and Manzo (2017) showed in their study that using technologies with digital natives' students is a way to meet the needs of these learners, and the

results showed improvement in the interaction with the students, efficiency with the content of the course, engagement in the class, which lead to better academic performance. Abou Afach, Kiwan and Semaan (2018) showed in their study that using technology in education, video presentation tool in particular, helps learnersto be more motivated, more comfortable in the classroom and readier to understand concepts. Furthermore, the growth of technology is nowadays inevitable, and it plays a major role in education. Its impact comprises a creative learning environment that gives teachers more control over instructional choices hence improving learning outcomes. Moreover, Sarkar, Ford and Manzo (2015) discussed adapting the use of technological tools to keep students engaged inside and outside the classroom.

PowToon in Education

PowToon is a web-based tool that offers a wide array of media options, graphics, cartoons, and animated images to create animated presentations that flow smoothly and logically. It also features classroom accounts for project-based learning. PowToon presentations can be exported to other programs including YouTube and PowerPoint that give flexibility in sharing the 'awesomeness'. PowToon is user-friendly allowing teachers to craft their own presentations that meet their students' needs instead of constantly searching for appropriate, ready-made videos. With the growing importance of proficiency in English Languageand given the fact that technology is intertwined in the learners' daily lives, the initiative to change the language classroom from abstract concepts to concept mapping is of paramount significance. In public schools, engaging students that already have developed learned helplessness towards learning English as a foreign language requires extensive preparation to reach different learning styles and increase motivation. PowToon hopefully offers a variety of media options to create interesting lesson plans that address visual and auditory learners while following a logical sequence. Tracy Weber (2014) states that PowToon can be used to teach any subject; "it could be employed in an English class to demonstrate knowledge of Romeo and Juliet from a student's perspective; and even in an industrial arts class by demonstrating welding techniques." PowToon paves the way towards teaching higher-order thinking skills like critical thinking, summarizing, and problem solving, which are basic skills for a successful global citizen in the 21st century.

Visual aids in class should be designed effectively in order to foster learning by helping students' associate meaning to specific cues. According to Sousa (2011), visuals reinforce understanding as "this helps students attach both auditory and visual cues to the information increasing the likelihood that sense and meaning will emerge and that they will be able to accurately retrieve the information later" (p.199).With its wide range of graphics and templates, preparing effective visual aids is within reach considering the promising results. Presenting new themes, concepts, vocabulary, writing strategies, listening or speaking activities can all come to life with available web tools creating an engaging atmosphere that can develop passion for learning. The key factor here is integrating methods that resonate with our teaching beliefs and views of learning while simultaneously meeting the curriculum objectives. Nanni, A. (2015) stated that educators must implement technology in ways that are consistent with pedagogical principles, and reflected the use of PowToon in the study where it was utilized in the language classroom to help the

students' innate technology skills become known. As a result, it showed creativity and led to meaningful and memorable learning experience. In addition, Hamilton-Hankins, O. (2017) showed in a study the positive impact of several technological tools including PowToon on instructional practices and students' engagement levels in the classroom. Fimbriani (2016) implemented the use of PowToon in the classroom by using various slides and videos followed by questions to check if the students understood the presentation used by PowToon. The aim was to make the students more interested in writing and more active in the classroom. The results showed that the implementation of PowToon improved the students' engagement, writing skills and attitude toward the teaching and learning process. Moreover, another use for PowToon in education where Fuchs (2014), a librarian who created a PowToon presentation and used it for a campus orientation event for new students, affirmed that PowToon made her presentation compelling, engaging and fun.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample: To test the effectiveness of PowToon in introducing language skills and as a tool for project-based learning, researchers chose first secondary class featuring PowToon to implement this study. The study focused on nine candidates of different achieving levels in English (three high-achievers, four average students, two low-achievers).

Variables

Independent variables: PowToon

Dependent variables: Comprehension, students' behavior, concentration, creativity and recalling information

Instruments: The researchers used students' interview, teacher's post- interview, student's observation during the lesson for tracking engagement and comprehension, in addition to formative assessment and projects performed by students using PowToon.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first step was choosing the first secondary class where the teacher has already prepared several PowToon presentations for higher-order thinking skills in an attempt to grab students' attention and enhance comprehension. The researchers wanted to examine the impact of using PowToon on teaching language and introducing new concepts. In order to teach students how to summarize, the teacher presented all the steps needed in the PowToon presentation followed by both guided and independent practice and finalized with assessment. A focus group consisting of low-achievers, average and brilliant students was chosen for the interview directly after the session. Questions were related to brief description of the experience, best features they liked about the program followed by reflection and comparing the newly implemented method with their previous traditional experience. After openly discussing their views and suggestions for future use of the web 2.0 tool, students submitted the answers along with their emails in order to access the link of the PowToon presentation exported to YouTube. Students were asked to watch the video twice at home without being told about the assessment in advance. On the next session, all the students in the class underwent formative assessment. Results of focus group were compared to the rest of the class. The third step was creating accounts for

the students of the focus group and training them to create their projects at the end of the unit using PowToon. Candidates were given one week to prepare for the presentation and were guided to watch tutorials and contact the researchers for any help. The fourth step was creating a class YouTube channel for uploading lessons and showcasing projects prepared by students using PowToon. Finally, the teacher was interviewed to reflect upon the experience.

RESULTS

Impact on Students: During the lesson, it was clear that there was less disruptive behavior since students were highly engaged and concentrating on the video. The informal assessment at the end of the session depicted better overall performance. Students were focused throughout the entire session while responding positively to instructions.

Interview: The answers of the interview conveyed that all learners approved the animated presentation created using PowToon. They regarded it as an exciting, successful learning experience.

- What did you think of the program?

Interviewees agreed that this program could facilitate learning and improve concentration. They were better able to recall main ideas and details by the end of the session. The logical sequence followed enhanced comprehension.

- How did you feel about it?

Students enjoyed the new experience and reported that it was engaging and interactive. Some described it as motivating, inspiring and electrifying.

- What did you like best about this program?

Students found the visuals and animations interesting, and commented on the music and the clarity of the presentation. They also favored its simplicity and organization. Having access to the video at home seemed prompting and crucial for revision.

- Compare your experience with PowToon to past experience, i.e., traditional ways of learning.

Students described their previous experience as tedious, monotonous, disorganized and complicated; teaching summary in previous classes was no more than few instructions given haphazardly. However, with PowToon, they were able to follow up smoothly with every step and understand concepts easier.

- What suggestions do you have for improving PowToon experience?

Most students recommended implementing this program in other subjects as well. One student suggested reducing the use of characters to avoid distraction.

- How can using this program help you as a learner?

Some students suggested using PowToon for creating new projects and delivering presentations. Watching these videos at home could fill gaps, reinforce understanding, and facilitate studying by being great resources for revision.

The formative assessment showed the following percentages for the first exercise: 23% of students scored "A", 64% scored "B", and 13% scored "C". The class showed improvement over past performance. The focus group who watched the video scored higher with 44.4% of students scoring A, 44.4% B, and 11% C. Engagement in the classroom contributed to this improvement since student engagement is correlated with academic achievement (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Another factor which yielded this progress is the logical sequencing of the steps visually represented. For the second task, 78% of the focus group members who watched the video at home scored A, i.e., they were able to recall definition of a summary and all the steps involved. The observer also noticed that they seemed more confident during the quiz and finished the task faster than others. According to Honey (2001), increases in standardized test scores and support for the development of early literacy skills are outcomes of implementing educational technology (O'Donnell, 2013). When students were given the chance to use PowToon for their projects on an environmental issue, they were very excited about the training and showed cooperation. Only one student reported having difficulty logging in to her account and another wanted help in exporting the presentation to YouTube.

The researchers provided help when necessary, yet preparing the presentation seemed to go smoothly as PowToon is user-friendly and provides many templates (promotional videos, slideshow, educational clip, social clip, infographic video) for beginners. On the day of presentation, candidates who used PowToon seemed more confident than others, more organized, and were able to capture the audience's interest without any interruption. The other students approved the presentations and expressed their intention of using PowToon in future presentations. Working on PowToon presentations enabled students to demonstrate collaborative learning and creativity in the design and organization of ideas. Both collaboration and creativity are essential skills for the 21st century learners. After creating the class YouTube channel, the teacher posted the lessons and uploaded the students' animated presentations. Students were curious about the videos, reviewed previous lessons, and even viewed lessons not covered yet. Even students from other classes viewed the video and asked whether they can undergo training to use the program. In fact, opportunities for creating presentations that summarize what students learn using PowToon are endless.

Impact on Teacher

Before using PowToon, the teacher experienced many management problems due to lack of interest in English language and poor listening skills. Through PowToon, students are better able to follow-up with the teacher's explanation to grasp the concept. Abstract, concrete, verbal, and nonverbal concepts are made easier using effective visual aids (Sousa, 2011). Students are better able to recall information, thus alleviating tedious drilling and repetition. The teacher reported that students showed dedication and enthusiasm concerning the project using PowToon. They collaborated to create a special animated video presentation with organized information. Such interesting presentations ignited excitement in class reducing disruptive behavior during presentations accordingly and enhancing learner's listening skills. Lifelong learning is promoted when students take responsibility of their own learning and work collaboratively on projects that unleash their creativity.

Conclusion

After applying this study using PowToon tool on EFL learners, we noticed that it came with positive results on the learners' level of engagement, comprehension and language acquisition. Moreover, the students were able to stay focused for the entire sessions when using a PowToon video, and later they were able to create their own PowToon videos. The researchers were able to start a YouTube channel and upload six PowToon videos created by the students and the researchers. Below you can find the link to the channel on YouTube showing six videos used in this article: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOeNDh7vL2A79fKi5bLvdgg>. The researchers have noticed that students showed dedication and enthusiasm concerning PowToon use in classroom and suggested emphasizing its use in the learning process. In a similar vein, the teacher has showed interest in this technology tool for its profound effect on students' comprehension, learning strategies and solving unenviable management problems.

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