Review

A road map to engage online EFL and ESL learners: A book review in focus

Hossein Isaee*, Hamed Barjesteh

The Department of English Language and Literature, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran
* Corresponding author: Hossein Isaee, hossein_isaee@yahoo.com

Abstract: The outbreak of coronavirus in 2020 posed a significant challenge for English Language Teaching (ELT) instructors, who were obliged to transform their face-to-face classes into virtual and online ones overnight. In this new, unfamiliar context, it was crucial to keep students constantly engaged, motivated, and interested in learning. Nonetheless, rather than merely taking into account the pessimistic facets of this paradigm shift, many scholars and experts tried to concentrate on the chances that remote/online context presents for language learning and teaching communities. In effect, "Engaging Online Language Learners" is a practical book, the authors of which have considered the sudden shift online connected with the pandemic as an opportunity to enhance the inclusivity of language learning while testifying that EFL/ESL learners' engagement in a remote/online language learning context ought to be an inevitable priority. Being well targeted to its ELT audience and deeply grounded in both principles of learning engagement and foreign language teaching theories, the book straightly targets language teachers, whether experienced ones or those who intend to teach online for the first time. It also bestows ELT teachers with a clear road map to discern what the next steps are for innovative practices in online/remote learning and teaching contexts.

Keywords: ELT; engagement; face-to-face classes; online learning/teaching

1. Introduction

Eminent learning and teaching theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner unanimously insisted that humankind learns through interaction and not in a vacuum. Based on the Vygotskian approach, Hedegaard [1] declared that learners are scaffolded through social interaction, which leads to learning from the perspective of others to build up a more compound worldview. As Bornstein and Bruner [2] say, "development is intrinsically bound up with interaction". In effect, preparing an effective, attractive, and well-rounded curriculum is vital in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). However, maintaining students continuously engaged and motivated in the process of learning is of even higher importance to ensure effective learning and to meet the objectives of the curriculum. In the domain of online education, numerous scholars have maintained the same perspective, believing that engagement and interaction eventually lead to a fruitful course [3–6].

Based on Piaget's constructivist approach, it is emphasized that for learning to be meaningful, it must be connected to the learner [7]. He further explained engaged learning as how learners learn about their world (i.e., new knowledge built on previous experiences and influenced by noble experiences). Moreover, as Nunan [8] claims, EFL and ESL instructors who prefer to adopt a student-centered approach probably add up the chances for engagement of students; this in turn aids learners in obtaining the objectives of the course more successfully [9]. Based on cognitive challenge and motivation, engaged learning is a sort of collaborative learning where the student and

teacher are true partners in answering essential questions and knowledge construction in addition to meaningful involvement with applications or materials. Such a strategic approach includes establishing timelines, setting goals, and creating/assessing authentic products. In other words, engagement theory holds that students who are involved behaviorally, socially, and intellectually lead to enhanced learning [10]. In addition, as a framework for technology-based learning and teaching, the theory of engagement is built upon the fundamental philosophy that learners ought to be meaningfully engaged in learning activities through both interaction with others and appropriate tasks. Although such engagement can happen without technology utilization, Kearsley and Schneiderman believed that engagement could be facilitated by technology in ways that are usually hard to achieve otherwise.

While motivating and engaging learners in the classroom context has been vital for students' success and improvement, it is even more challenging and significant in online or remote learning [11]. With technology proliferation, the world is getting more and more condensed. A continent away, EFL and ESL learners may use their smart devices to enjoy a desired classroom! In turn, remote/online classrooms are tremendously diverse, and different learning styles and expectations, individual background and cultural values, learning preferences, teachers' professional development, and the literacy needed to apply variant tools, software, and applications are among the challenges the instructors have been confronting, and to top of all, should a remote/online course pursue some objectives, the involvement and engagement of the learner in the course is inevitable.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, an unprecedented global push towards remote online language teaching was generated, which made many teachers as well as courses for the first time shift remote and online [12]. Therefore, instead of concentrating on the pessimistic facets of such a swift paradigm shift in all educational systems worldwide, the authors of the book "Engaging Online Language Learners: A Practical Guide" decided to concentrate on the chances and opportunities that online/remote learning provides for language learning and teaching. Having been authorized by dear Faridah Pawan, Sharon Daley, Xiaojing Kou, and Curtis J. Bonk and published by TESOL Press [13], this practical guide provides English language teachers with several strategies, techniques, and ready-to-use activities to aid true readers in motivating and engaging their online students for improved learner outcomes. The book under review in this paper also covers trends in remote and online teaching/learning, motivation, principles and competencies of engagement, and methods for administrators to support the professional development of teachers.

2. The book review

To boost the overall quality of online teaching in the technology era, the book "Engaging Online Language Learners: A Practical Guide" approaches the issue of engaging learners in the online context in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) and, with particular preference towards collaborative remote/online learning, tries to introduce new techniques and strategies to help EFL/ESL instructors, teacher trainers, and professors overcome the challenges they typically run into in both synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching in their English language course.

The main gap that ignited the idea and encouraged the authors to start writing the book was the swift presentation of remote/online learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused teachers and nearly all the courses to change online for the first time. Besides, keeping students actively engaged and constantly motivated was the other source of inspiration.

"Engaging Online Language Learners: A Practical Guide" uses page-turner-friendly, rational, easy-to-understand, and well-structured sectioning by categorizing its 10 chapters into four main sections, which are briefly discussed in the following lines. In the first section, the book starts with a preface, which endows readers with both an abridged introduction of the purpose of the book and a presentation to the upcoming 3 sections and their parts. The following three sections consist of some chapters, introducing a substantive facet of the topic, considering the problems, solutions, whys, ways, techniques, and further steps to persuade students to engage in the remote learning context.

In the second section of "Engaging Online Language Learners", there are 3 chapters that address different methods to entirely engage learners online; hence, the writers showcase rudiments to remote language learning. Being useful to language learning, the activities in this section are adaptable to various levels of language proficiency, simple, well-structured, and applicable to different languages. The third section consists of 4 chapters focused on different techniques structured around various forms of learner presence. Lastly, the fourth section of the book contains 3 chapters where the authors discuss the future of online language teaching and how it could be further developed and promoted.

It would be unfair not to mention that the book is also accompanied by a website with various online resources. Additionally, the book offers specific ideas for tried and tested activities gathered from seasoned online teachers, which can significantly enhance online learning. Overall, "Engaging Online Language Learners: A Practical Guide" offers the information and the tools required to:

1) Create authentic activities
2) Convert a conventional classroom to an online environment
3) Create and design authentic activities
4) Implement amazing games and simulations
5) Build up group activities and peer interaction via peer partnerships
6) Utilize activities that ignite engagement and motivation among students
7) Evaluate the learning that happens as a result of engagement/collaborative activities

Create authentic activities. Because the book under review in this paper straightforward targets ELT teachers and is deeply grounded in principles of learning engagement and foreign language teaching theories, the ten chapters of the book are briefly reviewed in the following lines:

Chapter 1 introduces online language learning and highlights the increasing loads of learners involved and engaged in remote/online language learning, as well as explanations of how L2 is taught or learned online. Being fundamental to the book's theoretical scheme of self-led learning and learning motivation, this chapter also introduces the concept of motivation in L2 learning. The involvement of the students

in the course is critical for an online course to be effective, whether it's called building community, engagement, or interaction.

Chapter 2 manifests the principles and basics in that self-regulation and self-efficacy bring on engagement in remote/online learning contexts. Some researchers have shown that self-efficacy attitudes are positively correlated with academic achievement and motivation. This supports the argument that students revealing more self-efficacy are more likely to pursue much more challenging goals, participate readily, work harder, persist longer when faced with difficulties, and put in more effort to achieve their identified goals. Moreover, teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy have also proved to be impressive in influencing enthusiasm for teaching, namely effective teaching and personal commitment.

A part of Chapter 2 has also been allocated to introducing and applying a group of other helpful principles of learning (i.e., TEC-VARIETY), and the eager teachers would have the chance to see the required explanations in detail.

Chapter 3 discusses the competencies required for remote/online L2 teaching, using the TESOL Technology Standards Framework as a reference. This framework provides guidelines for understanding the expectations for teachers and learners in terms of technology. The standards aim to define the appropriate use of technology and promote best practices in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in various global settings. Despite the increasing use of technology in language teaching and learning, there has been a lack of clear guidelines on how to implement technology to promote language learning successfully. The TESOL Technology Standards aim to compensate for such a void. In other words, the online language teaching competencies outlined in this chapter address the knowledge and skills that instructors need to be able to teach online effectively.

Chapter 4 outlines teaching presence and its key principles, which include 1) facilitation, 2) course design, and 3) self-presentation as the primary devices for learner engagement. Teaching presence, self-regulation, and social presence are all factors that predict student persistence and engagement. Self-regulation is crucial for the academic achievement of learners in (a)synchronous remote/online learning. Therefore, it is important to focus more on self-regulation in online, remote, and blended learning environments.

Chapter 5 presents the cognitive presence tools comprising higher-order thinking and challenge. As the authors maintain, cognitive presence refers to the extent to which students can construct meaning via sustained communication. It is the key factor in critical thinking, which is essential for higher levels of learning and thinking. In the same vein, social presence, another core element, is the capability of students to project their traits into the community, and such an element is important in supporting cognitive presence by indirectly facilitating critical thinking within the learners' community. In addition, teaching presence consists of 2 functions: 1) designing the educational experience and 2) facilitating the learning activities. According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer [14], this element encompasses the creation, facilitation, and integration of both social and cognitive presence.

Chapter 6 introduces the extent of social involvement in the remote/online context as a main factor in engagement (known as social presence). Establishing social connections is considered to be a basic human need, and such a need normally extends

into remote/online environments. Even when online, learners are not only seeking information; they are also looking for support, affirmation, and affiliation. Remote and online learning include social aspects, and at the heart of the learning process are social interactions.

Chapter 7 focuses on learner presence and introduces self-directed learning as the central theme. Each chapter includes specific activities that demonstrate how these sorts of presence could be utilized to encourage engagement. In this regard, the activities follow a standard template, providing information such as age ranges, descriptions, purposes, suggested tools, and scaffolding. This allows instructors to incorporate tasks and activities into lesson plans and course materials. While such lessons and tips are helpful to all ages, several are specifically designed for adult or upper-level learners.

Chapter 8 showcases exemplary and inspirational online teaching practices, such as 'VOCAL' (visible, organized, compassionate, analytical, and leaders) and 'Guide on the Side'. These concise overviews offer additional insight for teachers looking to enhance their online teaching techniques. As the authors of the book declare, in online teaching, your role is less about being the primary source of information and more about guiding and facilitating learning. Your presence in the remote/online context is crucial to letting students know that they have support and are not alone in their learning journey. We want to avoid making it feel like a "correspondence course" and ensure that students feel engaged and supported by someone who cares about their success on the other side of the screen.

Chapter 9 discusses the significant role of administration in remote/online language teaching. The chapter explains that online language teacher education (OLTE) needs to consider 5 key aspects when redesigning curricula. It also offers examples of learning activities that address each element. First of all, it should be acknowledged that remote/online digital language use differs significantly from in-person language use. Secondly, it should recognize that the knowledge of technology includes not only how to teach online but also what digital language use entails. Third, it must take into account that teachers and students have modern techno-identities developed and rooted not only in their academic lives but also in their everyday normal lives. Fourth, it needs to leverage the power of the Internet to establish trans-language-cultural awareness. Fifth, it should recognize that (both in-person and online) social presence is crucial to socio-collaborative learning.

Chapter 10, the final chapter, addresses the online environment and the challenge of inclusion, specifically focusing on the linguistic and cultural inclusion of learners from various backgrounds. With the rise of globalization, professional and social communication between individuals from diverse countries now occurs instantaneously. According to the authors, to create an online platform that is inclusively multicultural, the teacher needs to discern the learning preferences and cultural backgrounds of the language learners. An online class that is culturally responsive takes into account the cultural diversity among the students. To develop and maintain a culturally responsive course, the class should consider resources, design, facilitation, and assessment methods. Additionally, in Chapter 10, the writers have provided a concrete example of an inclusive course design to address implicit bias in teaching. They describe a free, online, self-paced workshop for teachers that

focuses on reducing biases to enhance teaching effectiveness. The example of the linguistically and culturally inclusive remote/online course is specifically effective, demonstrating how instructors could develop similar courses to maximize inclusion and reach.

3. Advantages of the book

"Engaging Online Language Learners" is a practical and theoretically scrupulous introduction to engaging online learning. Despite a few weaknesses, the book has a coherent and well-structured sectioning system. Every chapter prepares the groundwork for the following one, shaping a logical category under which all the chapters of the book reside. Motivating and engaging learners has always been critical for students' improvement and success [15]. It is even more challenging and significant in the remote/online context. This practical guide provides English language educators with many discriminate and clear-cut strategies and ready-to-use activities to aid them in motivating and engaging their students for enhanced learner outcomes. Moreover, trends in remote/online learning, engagement, motivation principles and competencies, and ways administrators could employ to support teachers' professional development are also covered in this book.

In addition, one of the book's most evident strengths is its concrete example of an inclusive course design that addresses the issue through a teacher workshop (i.e., chapter 10), which consequently leads to fortifying EFL/ ESL teachers' knowledge with related methods and strategies. Another transparent advantage of this book is that it is highly probable to be practical for its main audience of seasoned and novice remote/online language instructors. Furthermore, it might also be of interest not only to curriculum developers who implement online courses but also to academia and intelligentsia who are seeking insight into online teaching practice. It is worth mentioning that the authors' theoretical framework can be referenced by any reader to gain a better understanding of the engagement activities and to develop their own. The authors have firmly grounded their work in theories of foreign language teaching and principles of learning. Additionally, the book is accompanied by a website as an additional resource.

Last but not least, considering homeschooling, distance education, technology-enhanced instruction, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational systems worldwide, there is a growing need for educators and learners to improve their internet literacy and technological skills [16]. The book being reviewed is a valuable resource for both EFL learners and teachers.

4. Shortcomings of the book

The authors of this paper suggest quite a few weaknesses that must be mentioned, although such shortcomings never sabotage the helpfulness of "Engaging Online Language Learners" for its page-turners and audience. Activities are generic and may require adaptation and elaboration for use in remote/online courses. Although the activities are easy to adapt, teachers may require extra resources. However, this flexibility allows the activities to be applied to various sorts of language courses. The authors did not focus much on structural factors affecting student engagement, like

access to technology and administrative policies addressing these limitations. The book is aimed at course management practices, so it makes sense that certain structural factors are beyond the authors' control. However, there could be a theoretical issue with their use of learner presence, which is a contentious addition to the community of inquiry (COI) framework. The originator of the COI framework has questioned the need for this inclusion. The content of the entire chapter may only be relevant and practical for native English speakers. In other words, some parts may be unclear to speakers of other languages. It would be more informative to include studies and examples from more diverse contexts, such as the Middle East or the Iranian EFL context, to make it applicable to a broader range of cultures and contexts. Therefore, it is recommended that future research in this area should focus on various cultures and contexts, including the Iranian EFL context.

5. Conclusion

In the last two decades, there has been an increase in our understanding of the characteristics of remote/online classes and the importance of engaged learning in an online context. This understanding was greatly amplified by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, which caused an unprecedented shift in the global educational system. According to Isaee and Barjesteh [17], the impact of COVID-19 on the education system has disrupted the learning of many students. Students are required to take an active role in an online learning context to generate knowledge and manage their own learning experience. Furthermore, in a learner-centered context, the classical responsibilities of the instructor, such as leading discussions or providing resources, are shifted to the students. Success in an online learning environment relies on the utilization of instructional strategies that support this shift in roles and the development of self-direction. As Kearsley [18] maintains, the most significant role of the instructor in remote/online classes is to ensure a high degree of participation and interactivity, which means designing and conducting learning tasks and activities that lead to engagement with the subject matter and with fellow students. Learners cannot be passive knowledge-absorbers who merely rely on the teacher to feed them the information. Therefore, "Engaging Online Language Learners" is the leading practical book in the field as a theoretically rigorous introduction to engagement for online learning that is firmly based on the principles of language methodology.

Overall, this practical guidebook provides English language educators with numerous ready-to-use activities and strategies to aid teachers in motivating and engaging their learners, leading to improved learner outcomes. The guidebook also covers motivation principles and competencies, trends in online learning, as well as engagement. Additionally, it discusses ways administrators can support teachers' professional development. It is strongly prescribed for ELT material developers, teachers, teacher trainers, professors, university students, and EFL/ESL learners who can benefit from the instructions given for the enhancement of online learning and learner engagement. This book is undoubtedly a must-read for both ELT instructors and EFL/ESL learners to elevate their competencies, especially in times of emergencies such as COVID-19.

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