

**OBSERVING THE IMPACT OF YOUTUBE VIDEOS ON STUDENTS’
ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING**

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Abstract: The rapid technological development has tremendously impacted people’s every walk of life including the way they learn. Thus, researchers and educators try to look for viable solutions to harness the potential technology can bring to the education process. One way to engage students at present in actual learning is to use/create YouTube videos for university courses. The article describes a qualitative study of the impact YouTube videos had on students’ engagement and learning during 2023-2024 at the classes held at Alecu Russo Balti State University. The data was gathered with the help of observation and informal discussions with the students. Analyzing students’ behavior and actions it appears that YouTube videos can positively impact students’ engagement and learning if the students are autonomous learners and are intrinsically motivated to study at the university. Thus, teachers should think of how to optimally integrate the YouTube videos into the education process. Similarly, they should consider creating their own YouTube content to scaffold their students’ learning.

Keywords: YouTube videos, learning, engagement, autonomous learning, motivation

Introduction

Technology has changed people’s perception of themselves and the reality around them. It has considerably impacted their way of functioning at present, in many ways facilitating their lives. However, it has similarly contributed to their bewilderment and an increased sense of uncertainty (see Casio, 2020) partially due to the rapid pace of technological changes that seem to infiltrate people’s very core of being human. Hence, the dilemma of whether technology is a friend or foe to the progress of humanity. There are voices going as far as to claim that AI may be one of the biggest threats humanity is to face (Wootson, 2017).

It is rather difficult to give a comprehensive answer to this dilemma as it relates to people’s agency and responsibility to use technology ethically. In addition, it involves the use of their personal moral compass, which may differ from person to person. This accounts for the myriad contradictory perceptions of the role technology plays at present. A consensus, however, is that technology will continue to evolve and infiltrate people’s lives more and more. Thus, the primary focus should be on how to effectively integrate technology so that people preserve their core of being human.

Education should play a fundamental role in helping people develop the ability of using technology ethically and morally. Nowadays education tends to become more and more digitalized. Yet, it still remains unclear to what extent it helps students become independent and creative thinkers, a desideratum that has been articulated back in 1969 in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1969). Moreover, it is rather challenging to determine to what extent it actually contributes to their engagement and learning. What is apparent is that AI is based on deep learning; what is obscure is to what extent it can enhance students' learning.

The effective integration of technology in the language classroom has been an issue since the appearance of the first technological tools. CALL was an important component in various books, in which scholars emphasized the benefits of integrating technology even before the advent of the internet (Beatty, 2010).

Brown, for example, advocates for CALL emphasizing the following benefits:

1. multimodal practice with feedback;
2. individualization in a large class;
3. pair and small-group work on projects, either collaboratively or competitively;
4. the fun factor;
5. variety in the resources available and learning styles used;
6. exploratory learning with large amounts of language data;
7. real-life skill building in computer use (Brown, 2001, p. 145).

When the internet became part of every walk of life, scholars again looked into ways of integrating it into the language classroom emphasizing its potential to the linguistic exposure, on the one hand, and its potential to connect people into discourse communities, on the other. The assumption was that technology can substantially contribute to the development of learners' communicative skills as well as their autonomous learning (Beatty, 2010; Carstens, Sheehan, 2014; Condrat, 2014).

Undeniably technology has impacted the way learners study at present; yet, it still remains unclear whether or not it truly enhances their learning (Condrat, 2023, 2020). For example, a study conducted in 2018 showed that the flippability of the language classroom seemed unlucky at the time due to the students' lack of autonomous learning (Condrat, 2019). However, as more and more tools appear, both educators and scholars try to determine how they can use them to engage their students in the process of learning so that they find the process meaningful and motivational.

Methodology

YouTube has become rather popular with more and more people turning to it for both entertainment and education. They seem to consume the content that is easy and accessible, but above all delivered in an entertaining manner. It appears to offer the possibility to flip the education process altogether involving students' in the process of active learning.

The present study is an attempt to further investigate the potential of YouTube inside and outside the classroom aiming to observe whether or not it can contribute to the enhancement of students' engagement and actual learning.

The study was conducted at Alecu Russo Balti State University during the autumn and spring semesters of 2023-2024. It observed the behavior and reactions of 20 students in the first semester, and 22 students in the second semester. The students were observed during the courses in Stylistics, Public Speaking, Literature, and Language Education.

The observation aimed to determine their engagement and learning enhancement while:

1. watching YouTube videos in the classroom,
2. watching YouTube videos outside the classroom as individual work;
3. creating their own YouTube videos to demonstrate ability to apply the gained knowledge during the course.

Results

Watching YouTube videos in the classroom

The chosen videos to be watched in the classroom were supposed to scaffold students' understanding of some concepts related to the topics covered during the lessons. For example, in the class of literature students were asked to watch and summarize the key ideas of romanticism after watching the video created by the School of Life *History of Ideas: Romanticism*.

At the beginning, the majority of the students seemed to be engaged in watching the video. Yet, half of them seemed to be less interested close to the end of the video. It was possible to note this change because of the noise they started to make, some even checking their phones (namely their social media accounts). Upon analysis, it was observed that:

- some students found rather challenging to take relevant notes that will help them summarize the key ideas;
- a few students could not understand the message conveyed in the video due to their rather poor language proficiency level;
- although the video was high-quality with a lot of illustrations, it did not retain their attention till the very end.

It appears that around 4 students out of 11 attending that course can be said to have benefited from watching the video. They were able to summarize some of the ideas. Similarly, they showed interest and engagement in the process of watching the video. Later on they were able to use the knowledge gained during this experience when they took the midterm test.

During one of the classes in Public Speaking, students were invited to watch three videos. One was supposed to help them understand the components of an effecting networking elevator speech; the other two were examples of actual speeches.

Upon observation, students seemed to benefit little from the explanatory video as they relied on the information the teacher presented (it should be added that they were more engaged in listening to the teacher and taking pictures of her presentation slides made on Canva than taking notes from the video). However, when it comes to the examples of actual networking elevator speeches the majority of the students were truly engaged. Some admitted that they liked the examples as that helped them get a clear picture of how to make their own speeches.

Despite the fact that students' engagement was rather high when watching samples of actual speeches, it remains unclear if watching the videos helped them in the process of creation of their own videos. It was observed that the majority of the students tended to parrot the speeches and not create their own. What happened was that those students tried to use patterns from the speeches, and not create their own following the structure of those speeches.

The videos used in the course of Stylistics were supposed to make the process of identifying the stylistic devices more engaging. Some videos were chosen to demonstrate certain stylistic devices, while students were encouraged to determine what they were.

It was observed that if the video was a clip from a contemporary movie, the students seemed to be more engaged. However, if they were asked to watch a video that was filmed in the previous century (e.g. Pete Seeger's song *What Did You Learn In School?*), they showed less engagement. Another interesting observation was that although they liked videos closer to the present context, the majority found it equally challenging to correctly identify the stylistic devices. Thus, it seems that watching videos contributes to students' engagement, but does not necessarily result in actual learning in some of the cases.

In the course of Language Education, watching YouTube videos seemed to help students get a better understanding of how to organize a lesson. It was observed that students particularly liked watching fragments of actual lessons that were analyzed later on.

It can be stated that they were engaged in watching the videos and were able to analyze them. Thus, the majority of students were able to correctly identify the stages of the lessons, what techniques the teachers used, the learners' involvement in the process, etc.

Students were also exposed to some videos that aimed to explain some theoretical concepts. It was remarked that the majority was rather disengaged and not paying full attention to the videos. During discussions they admitted they did not like such videos as they perceive them as boring and not interesting. Another interesting remark was that some students simply do not perceive watching videos as contributing to their learning. They openly admitted that they "switch off their brains" as for them watching a YouTube video means above all relaxation.

Watching YouTube videos outside the classroom as individual work

Students were similarly encouraged to watch YouTube videos outside the classroom. A series of videos were created for the course in Public Speaking. Those videos were supposed to offer students scaffolding while learning some concepts related to the subject matter, and which were supposed to be covered individually.

The videos were uploaded on YouTube. For the students' convenience their links were on the MOODLE course page. They also had the possibility to read the material. The students' progress was tracked with the help of 4 quizzes and 4 assignments they were supposed to do.

It can be stated that 13 students out of 20 benefited from the information they were encouraged to consult on MOODLE. It is rather difficult to determine the effectiveness of the YouTube videos as it was challenging to determine how many exactly watched the videos. However, the majority admitted to having watched them. They claimed that they found them useful in understanding the material better.

However, when students were asked to watch YouTube videos independently in other courses (e.g. Language Education), the number of students who did the task was very small. Thus only 4 students out of 13 did the task. The others did not watch the videos at all.

As the individual work was graded separately in the course of Public Speaking, the students were more motivated to do the tasks. However, if they knew that there was no grade given for the tasks in the course of Language Education, the majority did not bother to do the task. It appears that university students need to be extrinsically motivated and that they do not have intrinsic motivation to study the subject. (Similar behavior was noticed in the classroom which did not involve watching YouTube videos.)

Creating their own YouTube videos to demonstrate ability to apply the gained knowledge during the course

Another task believed to be perceived as engaging by students and resulting in their actual learning was the one in which they were asked to create their own YouTube videos. Thus, it was assumed that they would be able to get to the top of Bloom's taxonomy developing their higher order thinking skills. In addition, they could try their own hand at becoming content creators online.

The students were encouraged to create a video in which they were supposed to briefly introduce themselves and their channel to their potential followers on YouTube. They were supposed to create videos relying on the knowledge they gained during the courses, particularly those in Stylistics and Public Speaking.

It should be mentioned that they were also shown two examples of their teacher's videos, which were analyzed in the classroom. These were rather outdated examples. At first, the students seemed to be reluctant to openly criticize the videos. Yet, the teacher nudged them to point to the drawbacks and say what needed to be improved. The assumption was

that the students would avoid making similar mistakes. Similarly, it was assumed that the affective filter would be lowered as they could feel less stress to create videos knowing that it was natural to make mistakes.

The result was rather discouraging as only 9 students out of 20 created their own videos. The others did not do the task. The 11 students found the task too challenging, irrelevant, and not interesting. 3 students out of those 11 even forgot that they had to do the task.

However, the 9 videos sent to the teacher were rather well-done. Students tried to apply the knowledge gained during the courses. They did their best to make relevant linguistic choices for their videos. They used their body language and voice appropriately. Some managed to create catchy and memorable videos for their “channels” devoted to their hobbies.

Conclusion

As seen, YouTube videos can impact students’ engagement and learning to a certain extent. In the observed context it can be stated that it considerably enhanced some of the students’ engagement and learning.

Some of the reasons why other students did not find the YouTube videos engaging and enhancing their learning are the following:

1. students did not develop autonomous learning;
2. students have a poor language proficiency level;
3. students feel lost and uncertain (some still did not know why they were at the university);
4. students do not have intrinsic motivation;
5. students have the firm conviction that they would never work as teachers or translators (some claimed that they only needed the university graduation certificate).

Undeniably the potential of YouTube materials should be further explored. Moreover, teachers should become more of YouTube educational content creators to set an example, on the one hand, and to offer additional materials to enhance students’ learning, on the other. The task is rather challenging and time consuming. Yet, as the desire is to preserve the core of being human in our students it is worth trying creating one’s own education videos. Similarly, the vast number of already existing high-quality YouTube videos can be harnessed in the classroom on condition that students understand the purpose of watching the suggested video, i.e. how it contributes to their actual learning.

The task set for the 21st-century teachers (whether they are school teachers or university teachers) is indeed challenging as engaging the students in the process of learning becomes more and more difficult. The advent of AI has posed even more issues that are still to be tackled. Yet, teachers should not avoid experimenting. They should try to look for viable solutions that would respond to their students’ actual needs.

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