

Motivation in Digital Learning: Understanding Serendipitous EFL Learning through Cyberspace

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Abstract

The arrival of digital tools has the potential to profoundly influence learners of English as a foreign language in our country and this paper offers an account of how these proceedings may work. The focus of the study is to recognize how, in terms of English language learning, the teaching-learning environment can be created in cyberspace and how it could function with special emphasis on serendipitous learning. The paper then aims to explore the role of motivation in learning the English language from the perspective of Bangladeshi EFL learners. Later, the paper introduces a mechanism of inspiring the less motivated learners by concentrating on unconscious and semiconscious learning through utilizing tools in cyberspace. The study is based on data collected from a number of students from five public and private universities of Bangladesh. The research employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches by analyzing both questionnaire responses and one-on-one interviews.

Keywords: motivation, cyberspace, serendipitous learning

To shape the practice of everyday teaching, teachers need to have a holistic understanding of what happens in their classroom. They need to systematically observe their teaching, interpret their classroom events, evaluate their outcomes, identify problems, find solutions, and try them out to see once again what works and what does not (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 2).

We are living in the digital era where feeding on data is arguably more important than feeding on food. We have thus entered a time where certain methods have become obsolete and new methods or post methods are on the rise. For learning the English language, the same thing can be said. In the 1st IML International Conference held at the Institute of Modern Languages, University of Dhaka, Professor Dr. B Kumaravadivelu (2017) claimed that CLT was already a dead method and countries which have adopted it, have done it because of the label “communicative.” So if CLT is no more an expedient method, then what method can take its place? A lot of talk has been going on about “eclectic” and “heterogeneous” methods that do not hold firmly to a single model but instead depend on multifarious theories to access harmonizing comprehensions into the development and application of the specific approach. Dr. Kumaravadivelu (2017) certainly believes in a method that advocates trial and error, casting away the possibilities of an already existing method ready to be discovered and readily imitated and implemented. Certainly, the time has come for English language teachers to endorse and customize their own methods to achieve maximum output and the popularity and availability of digital/cyber spaces provides us with ample area to do just that.

Integrating ICT for the advancement of language teaching is not new in our country but using it to its full potential in order to achieve maximum output is still not common. Keeping that in mind, this paper attempts to put forward a methodology of creating an online language learning

environment for students in cyberspace based on the students' perceptions and acceptance of having an online environment for learning. The objective of the digital and/or virtual learning environment is to trigger serendipitous learning or what is more commonly known as learning by chance or coincidental learning (Buchem, 2012). The second part of the paper will further deal with the importance of serendipitous learning and its role in generating and sustaining learners' motivation. Since motivation is seen as an important feature to accomplish any objective, in learning a second language its function remains the same. Woolfolk (1998) defines motivation as, "an internal state that arouses, directs and maintains behavior" and there is no argument on the fact that serendipitous learning is heavily dependent on the learner's motivation levels (p. 372.). The paper therefore will shed light on the different levels and categories of motivation from the perspective of the learners of this country and examine how the serendipitous learning method can raise the motivational levels of the learners, consequently inspiring the less motivated ones.

Literature Review

Incidental Learning. To describe unexpected, fortunate discoveries, the term "serendipity" was coined by the novelist Horace Walpole in the 18th century (Buchem, 2012). Therefore, serendipity or serendipitous learning is learning that takes place as a by-product of other activities in a virtual environment. Buchem (2012) defines it as a subset of incidental learning which is sought by gaining new insights, discovering unrevealed aspects and recognizing seemingly unrelated connections. The users, while surfing the web, encounter information, process, and discourse which enable them to get new perspectives and polish language and other skills incidentally or by chance. A number of researchers have examined the nature and characteristics of this kind of learning. Incidental learning is tacit and unconscious as well as permanent and this is the most pervasive form of adult learning (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). Since incidental learning or serendipity is unconscious and takes place without the learners being aware, it has some analogy with language learning; as language is best learnt by acquisition which is also an unconscious process. A study conducted by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) among 300 undergraduate students at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, found that students believe Facebook could be utilized as an online environment to facilitate the learning of English and 72% of the students agreed that Facebook could be an environment for enhancing students' motivation to communicate in English. Buchem (2012) claims that the emergence of Web 2.0 services, including microblogging tools such as Yammer, Status Net, Plurk, and most notably, Twitter, can lead to meaningful learning and enhance exploratory behavior. Apart from facilitating learning, studies have found a link between learner motivation and fortunate unexpected discovery or serendipity. McFerrin (1999), through a study of 22 members of three sections of a graduate level asynchronous online distance education course at Northwestern State University of Louisiana in 1998, found that learners were very enthusiastic, better in time management and organizational skills, and, to be more specific, were fuelled by basic desire to learn something new which was in his words "[a] motivation which is rare in traditional classroom setting" (p. 1422). The present study tries to locate and outline a channeled or controlled serendipitous learning environment in cyberspace using social media which will educate learners and generate motivation for learning.

Motivation. Motivation has always been largely identified by scholars as one of the major variables which attributes to determining the level of success of a second language acquisition. The expertise of the instructor in motivating learners should be vital to effective teaching (Dornvei, 2001). Since this paper emphasizes on the importance of motivating the less motivated learners by introducing a new method, to understand which form of motivation works best for the learners



in the context of Bangladesh is of paramount importance. Therefore, comprehending various existing motivational theories is equally significant. The willingness to take part in the process of learning is one factor which is influenced by the motivation levels of the learners. Lambert (1963) developed a “social psychological model” and underlined cognitive aspects like intelligence and language abilities, and affective variables like motivation and attitudes in it (p. 114). In this theory, he argues that the level to which a person effectively learns a second language will rely on motivation, attitudes towards the second language, and ethnocentric predispositions. Oxford and Shearin (1974) stated that motivation influences the students’ use of second language learning strategies regulating how much they interact with native speakers in that language, how well they do in tests, and ultimately how high their overall proficiency increases. They also went on to argue that after the learning experience is over, it is down to their motivation levels that determine how long learners preserve and maintain the second language skills. They also examined a number of motivational theories and six variables were confirmed which influence motivation in terms of language learning: a. attitude, b. self-belief, c. goals and objectives, d. involvement, e. environmental support and f. personal attributes. It is often seen in the context of our country that out of these six variables, environmental support becomes the biggest predicament. Therefore, the importance of constructing a learning-friendly environment is required. RC Dital (2012) claimed that learners of second languages who have a positive attitude towards it are highly motivated both instrumentally and integratively whereas Christo Moskovsky and Fakieh Alrabai (2009) were of the opinion that English as a foreign language is more influenced by Instrumental motivation and English as a second language is more dependent on integrative motivation. As for the learners of the English language in the context of Bangladesh, they could either be motivated interactively or instrumentally, something we would later discover from the findings of a survey.

Theoretical Perspective

Understanding Learning Environment in Cyberspace. Anderson (2004), stating online learning as a subset of distance education, claims that it is more flexible in time and space than campus-based education. This type of learning needs to be learner-centered, knowledge-centered, community-centered, and assessment-centered (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 1999 as cited in Anderson, 2004). Online learning or learning in cyberspace, however, is different from conventional or formal learning and, hence, can be argued to be a form of informal learning. Marsick and Watkins (2001) defined informal learning as “a category that includes incidental learning may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured” (p. 25). Incidental learning is a by-product of other activities such as accomplishment of tasks, interactive communication, identifying structure, trial-and-error experimentation, etc. (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). One very prospective aspect of web-based learning is serendipity or leaning subconsciously and unexpectedly. When it comes to learning a language, there is no one perfect way to establish an online language learning environment and the factors that dominate in successfully creating one of these environments range from time, funding, ICT skills to learners’ access to gadgets and internet service required to navigate the environment once it is complete and ready for use. The nature of such an environment should be user-friendly where the learners can learn by observation, repetition, interaction, and problem solving.

The Role of Motivation in Serendipitous Learning of the English Language. The Acquisition-Learning hypothesis of Stephen Krashen (1982) claims that grammatical rules and drills are not required in language acquisition and language acquisition happens subconsciously. Language acquisition is informal in this process, and the “picking up” of the language takes place when the

users use the language to convey meaningful messages, unaware that the speakers are concerned with the messages they are conveying and understanding is of necessity (p. 10). This “meaningful interaction” when done in a serendipitous manner can become more fruitful for the learners because it is assumed to be directly related to the learners’ motivational levels. It is here that we are going to divide our trajectory into two premises to better understand and appreciate the role of motivation from the perspective of Bangladesh. The first of the two premises claims that there is a big difference in the methods of English language teaching in the different stages of the education system in Bangladesh and they are based on economy and geography. It is no wonder that a self-sustaining gap subsists in the many educational institutions in the way English is taught and learnt or facilitated and acquired depending on the money one can spend and the location in which the learner is situated. Therefore, when the learners arrive at the tertiary level, they find themselves in a very diverse group in terms of English competency. To understand the learners’ varied competency of English in the same course by the same instructor, two samples of the introduction paragraph of a contrast essay titled “Education in co-ed schools and in an all girls’/boys’ school” were taken. They will testify that, despite being from the same department, in the same institution, admitted in the same intake year, the difference in their written language is colossal. The paragraphs are reproduced as received.

(1) Paragraph written by Student 1:

In Bangladesh, the number of co-ed schools is less than the number of all girls’/boys’ schools. Now the question is, does being in an all boys’/girls’ school or in a co-ed school effect a child’s education and behavior differently? The answer is simple – both educating systems differ from each other and each has it’s own flaws and benefits. [sic]

(2) Paragraph written by Student 2:

Out of the co-ed schools of smart girls/boys students in the world. Students girls and boys are the most common popular in the school. They are computing platforms that the often very similar user interfeces and also experiences. However, they are also quite different from another major contrast are in the choices of students relationships, girls and boys composition related. [sic]

Paragraphs (1) and (2) are from two separate essays produced as an assignment in a course titled “Composition and Communication English” and written by two different individuals. Of the two excerpts, it is evident that what makes the second student produce such an error-filled paragraph which hardly makes any sense is his lack of basic language knowledge despite being in the tertiary level of education. Bringing the second student’s language quality anywhere near to the first student’s not only requires rigorous practice and hard work but also a unique level of motivation which can be facilitated through incidental and/or serendipitous learning.

The second premise focuses profoundly on outcome-based education (OBE). William Spady (1994), in his book *Outcome Based Education: Critical Issues and Answers*, has defined OBE as an educational system which clearly focuses and organizes everything around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experience. Regardless of the different levels of strengths and weaknesses in the abilities and skills of various learners, it is expected that by the end of a particular learning experience, all would possess similar levels of aptitude. Now if we just go back to the previously exemplified paragraphs – for paragraph (2) to reach the standards of paragraph (1), although seemingly impossible in the course of one semester (4 months), a lot of hard work, guidance, feedback, and most importantly, motivation is required.



It is very important for the facilitator to identify the learner's motivation as either integrative or Instrumental because based on that, the learner is to be motivated. Integratively motivated learners show a desire to learn a language with the objective to better comprehend the language, to have a better understanding of the community who use that language. Ellis (1997) describes that particular learners learn a target language to fulfill a desire of mixing with the people and culture associated with that particular language. On the other hand, learners who characterize Instrumental motivation have pragmatic reasons to learn a certain language like going for higher education, sitting for an IELTS test, etc. Gardner and Lambert (1992) understood Instrumental motivation as a way to obtain economic and social superiority. Many also argue that both types of motivations are of importance and a combination of the two can also fulfill the objective of language learning. However, Clement and Kruideniet (1983) believed that potential learners who want to befriend speakers of the target language can be motivated both instrumentally and integratively. Again, Woolfolk (1998) and Santrock (2004) define Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation respectively. For Woolfolk, intrinsic motivation is “[m]otivation that stems from the factors such as interest or curiosity” (p. 374). Santrock defines extrinsic motivation as motivation that which “involves doing something to obtain something else (a means to an end)” (p. 418). A connection can be drawn between the two types of motivations and integrative and instrumental motivations can be seen as intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as well.

Methodology

Online Language Environment and Serendipitous Learning. This study on the construction of an easily accessible environment is based on the direct feedback of language learners who are tertiary level students undergoing the English language learning process.

Participants. 50 students from five public and private universities were randomly selected on the basis that they were all attending a similar course that focused on learning the English language for academic purposes. All the participants had completed secondary and higher secondary level education, and were in the process of completing tertiary level education. The students were from different departments including Business Administration, Law, Engineering, Information Studies and Library Management, Pharmacy, and English Literature and Language.

Research Instrument and Data Collection. Each of the respondents was placed in a natural setting and provided with a questionnaire based on the Likert scale and comprising 10 questions. The students responded by circling the corresponding letter in the questionnaire.

Data Analysis Procedure. The data collected from the respondents were later analyzed using percentages and raw numbers. 48 students out of 50 responded to the questionnaire related to Online Language Environment.

Motivation. To understand what type of motivation will work more effectively in the context of the tertiary level learners of Bangladesh, another survey was carried out. This survey was also carried out on 50 respondents. However, these respondents were a different from those who responded to the first questionnaire.

Participants. The sampling was the same as for the first questionnaire, although they were not the same individuals.

Research Instrument and Data Collection. The 50 students were provided with a questionnaire each and this time the feedback form had 15 questions where in the first 10 questions, a nominal

level variable was used in the form of two values (yes or no). The other 5 questions were open-ended short responses.

Data Analysis Procedure. This time, too, the data collected from the respondents were later analyzed using percentages and raw numbers. In this survey, however, all 50 students responded to the questionnaire which will give us a better understanding of the type of motivation that is better suited to these specific students in the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh.

Findings and Discussions

Online Language Environment and Serendipitous Learning

48 students out of 50 responded to the questionnaire and provided the following results:

- 41 students strongly agreed that access to the internet is of immense importance for a learner of any particular language, not just English. The other 7 students agreed to this.
- 36 students strongly agreed that an online language learning environment would make the language learning process faster. 4 students agreed to it, 5 students remained undecided, and 3 students disagreed with the idea.
- 40 students strongly agreed that if an online language learning environment was created, they would feel more comfortable in practicing the language. 3 students agreed to this and 8 students remained undecided.
- 46 students strongly agreed to the idea that it would be more positive from their perspective if they learned the language without realizing that they were learning something at all. 2 students agreed to this.
- 47 students strongly agreed to the fact that the online language learning environment must remain easily accessible and inexpensive to use. 1 student agreed to it.
- 32 students strongly agreed to the fact that they are familiar with at least five different social media websites. 5 students agreed to this point. 4 students remained neutral and 7 students disagreed with this statement.
- 45 students strongly agreed that they use Facebook frequently. 3 students agreed to this point.
- 27 students strongly agreed that they use social media websites other than Facebook. 11 students agreed to this. 1 student remained neutral. 7 students disagreed and 2 students strongly disagreed with this statement.
- 35 students responded strongly in favor of using English as the medium of communication while using online platforms. 5 students remained neutral on this matter, and 8 students disagreed with this statement.
- As many as 44 students strongly believed that learning through social media is/can be fun. 3 students agreed to this, and 1 student remained undecided.

The feedback gathered from the respondents made it clear that an online language learning environment would provide them more time and space to work on their language development. It would also ease the process of learning but the method must remain user-friendly and economical.



The respondents were already in support of serendipitous learning and it must be kept in mind that the potential method will be heavily dependent on learning by chance and without the feeling that one is actually learning. Further conversations with the respondents made it clear that they spent most of their online time on a social networking site called Facebook and it was decided that this particular website can serve as a good space for the learning environment. Accessing this particular website is inexpensive, all-embracing, user-friendly, communicative, and, most importantly, already in use by most of the learners of the language. This will be later used in the paper to construct the serendipitous learning environment.

Motivation

All 50 students responded to the questionnaire and the following results were found:

- 84% of the respondents stated that they were learning the language because
 - they looked forward to landing good jobs with good salaries;
 - they could get good grades in language tests which will enable them to migrate abroad;
 - they thought it will be easier to go for higher studies if they are competent in another language;
 - they were asked by their parents/relatives to learn the language;
- 12% of the respondents replied that they were learning the language because
 - they were already good at the language and they want to continue;
 - they have developed an affection towards the language;
- 4% of the respondents provided the impression that they are learning the language because it is considered as the language of “smartness” and “intellectual aptitude,” signifying the language of the upper class.

From the outcome of this survey it can be understood that the percentage of instrumental or extrinsically motivated learners outnumbers the percentage of intrinsically motivated learners. So we can conclude that, in the context of Bangladesh and the tertiary level, learners are highly extrinsically motivated when it comes to learning the English language.

Now that we have understood what mostly motivates the tertiary learners in the perspective of our country, we must also try to comprehend that the extrinsic motivation is like an external force. It is generated by external factors such as tests, expectations of family members, facilitators, etc. and this form of motivation is not self-sustainable. As the second survey showed, Bangladesh is dominated by extrinsically motivated learners and if a way could be found to turn their extrinsic motivation into intrinsic motivation, the outcome of the English language learning would be far greater. And this is where the idea of the serendipitous learning method will come into play.

Recommended Serendipitous Learning Method

In the serendipitous learning method, the facilitator will use a language learning environment which is often used by the learners. Our first survey depicted that an online language learning environment is welcomed by most of the learners and we decided earlier that the social media site, Facebook, can be used. The facilitator’s job from here on in is to mask the extrinsic nature of motivation within the learners, with an imitation of intrinsic motivation towards learning the language. This can be done by realizing the concept of targeted serendipitous learning. Now, serendipitous learning as we know it, is learning by chance. The idea of targeted serendipitous

learning propagates that, whereas the learner will intrinsically learn or acquire the language thinking that it was accidental, the facilitator will know that the content shared in a particular place and time was deliberately done to fulfill the objective of facilitating the language acquiring process. Various language pages and groups on Facebook like ‘Grammarly’, ‘Grammar Girl’ and ‘FluentU’ are testaments that targeted serendipitous learning is possible. The facilitator only needs to “share” the contents (self-created or readily available) to his profile or in certain groups where the learners can come across them (by chance) and acquire the rules/spellings/techniques of the language. After a considerable amount of time, the targeted serendipitous learner will begin to show greater aptitude in the particular language. Since 2011, Facebook has been attracting the most number of visitors and a vast number of people among them use Facebook as a tool to harness education. Web 2.0 and its synchronous communications platforms provide new avenues for teachers to deliver curriculum and facilitate learning. Furthermore, they provide new avenues for students to engage and intensify their own learning. In the evolving and flexible tertiary environment, effective computer mediated communication (CMC) alternatives need to be explored (Van Doorn, 2013). Using social networking sites such as Facebook to facilitate language acquisition is also advantageous in terms of transgressing time and place, enabling subconscious and/or unconscious learning. Therefore, to ensure serendipitous or incidental learning through online platforms and to systematically achieve learning goals, a few steps can be performed. In the following recommendations, the social media platform, Facebook, has been used as an example:

1. The facilitator must first create a platform for interaction. The platform can be both open (Facebook wall, Facebook profiles, etc.) or closed (Facebook groups, Facebook pages, etc.).
2. The learners, then, must have access to the designated platforms. They must be connected as “Facebook friends” with the resource person and/or be members of the designated groups and pages.
3. Next, the facilitator will upload, share, or demonstrate images, documents, or files related to the target topic (grammar, vocabulary, reading or writing strategies, etc.), keeping in mind that the shared materials must align with user preference such as subjects of general popularity, trends, fashion, sports, pop culture, etc. The images can also depict specific rules and regulations of a particular topic in the target language and/or facilitate exercises which the learners feel compelled to complete.
4. The learners will come into contact with these images either through target groups or scrolling down on their Facebook newsfeed. Without having prior warning of such experience, the manner of contact with these images will be serendipitous. Given that the subject matter (images, names, objects) is of interest to the learner, the learner will read (and in some cases write and/or solve) the information or exercises provided. Discussions and answers can be communicated through the comment section of the post.
5. The facilitator, in their next meeting, will ask the learners to discuss the document(s) or image(s) among peers and communicate their ideas in small groups of three or four. In every case, the facilitator will be responsible for providing corrective feedback.
6. Exercises and tasks based on their incidental learning can be provided to the students in a class room setting for more precise understanding and for achieving learning goals.



Suggestions and Limitations

Earlier we claimed that a substantial gap exists in the language learning process in the tertiary level education system and its earlier educational stages in our country. To make amends for lost time, learners who do not have the required level of mastery in the English language that is expected of them, can spend extra time surfing certain websites to enable serendipitous learning which does not become tedious or monotonous since the process is unconscious. Also, since the language learning environment is a computer mediated network, communication between facilitator and learner also becomes easy and time-efficient, paving the way for extensive corrective feedback. Channeled serendipity or targeted serendipity (Rodgers, 2001) can also be an excellent method of learning the language for learners who are the least motivated. For this, the facilitators must also be proficient in online content creation in order to make interesting lessons that can grasp their learners' attention completely. Facilitators must also keep experimenting with new and stimulating strategies that will assist and enable learners to acquire the English language both for pragmatic benefits and also for the love of it.

The paper has its fair share of limitations as the method of serendipitous learning is based on a conflation theory between the role of motivation and the use of digital environments to assist in language learning. The practical use or outcome of this has not yet been quantified with proper surveys either. Further research and investigations are required to truly understand the nature, both positive and negative, of this process and only implementation and time can shed further light on this particular method.

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Appendix A

Ten questions based on the Likert scale

A – Strongly Agree, B – Agree, C – Neutral, D – Disagree, E – Strongly Disagree

1. For various reasons, access to the internet is very important in terms of learning a language other than your mother tongue.
2. The pace of learning a second language is faster in an online language learning environment.
3. Practicing and exercising a second language online is comfortable and non-regulatory.
4. Do you think that learning a second language would be easier and more efficient if the process of learning was subconscious?
5. Do you think the online language learning environment should be easily accessible and open for all?
6. You are familiar with different social media websites.
7. You use Facebook frequently.
8. You use social media websites other than Facebook.
9. English is mostly the medium of communication when you use social networking sites.
10. Learning through social media is fun.

Appendix B

10 questions based on a nominal level variable of two values (Yes or No)

1. Do you think learning the English language and being efficient in it will allow you to land a good job with a good salary? (Y/N)
2. Do you think being a competent user of the English language adds an extra dimension to your professional expertise? (Y/N)
3. Does being proficient in the English language help you in your academic ventures? (Y/N)
4. Did you consider learning the English language because it was just another language? (Y/N)
5. Do you learn the English language because you are forced to learn it for various professional or academic reasons? (Y/N)
6. Do you think you will be considered more knowledgeable or smart by your friends or family if you become a good communicator in the English language? (Y/N)
7. According to your belief, does being a good correspondent in the English language necessarily mean that you will do well in any responsibility you are provided with? (Y/N)
8. Do you find yourself using English only for class assignments and exams? (Y/N)
9. Are you interested in reading books and watching movies in English? (Y/N)
10. Do you think learning the English language will enable you to become an open minded sociable person? (Y/N)

5 open-ended questions

1. What is the primary reason behind your learning of the English language?
2. Do you like communicating in different forms (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) of the English language?
3. When communicating in English, what types of difficulties have you encountered?
4. Was peer-pressure ever an issue in terms of learning the English language?
5. How vital do you think learning the English language is in the context of Bangladesh?