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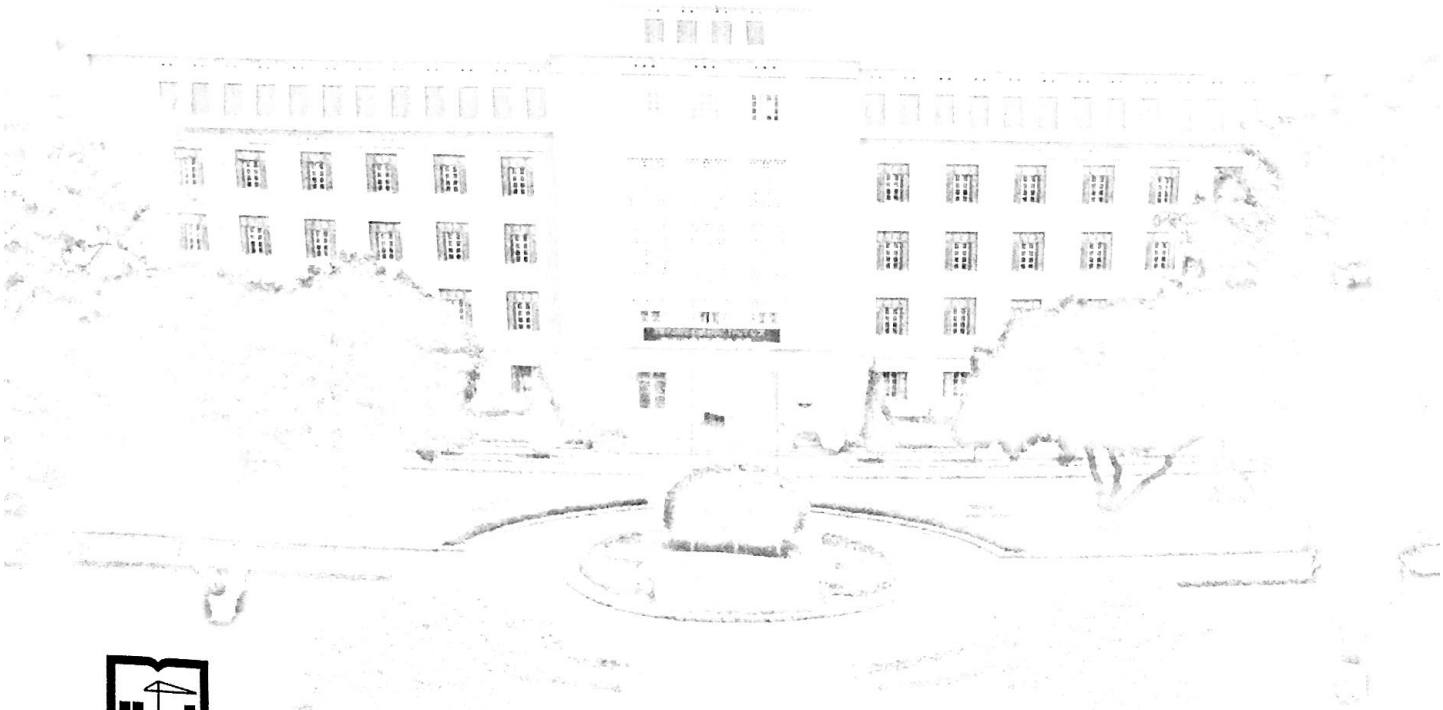

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DIVERSIFYING ACTIVITIES FOR PRACTISING ENGLISH IN ONLINE COURSES - A FACTUAL EXPERIENCE WITH 1ST YEAR STUDENTS AT HUMG

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1. INTRODUCTION

Online teaching and learning, as Sadiku et al. (2018) pointed out, is one kind of education that takes place on the Internet. It is often referred to as e-learning which offers synchronously and/ or asynchronously Internet-based courses. According to Harasim (2000), the first entire online course was offered in 1981. Since the 1990s, colleges and universities all over the world have offered courses and even entire degrees based on online courses. The benefits that online courses have brought about are undeniable, among which the outstanding is the flexibility of time and location. However, according to VietnamNet dated 3/3/2020, this type of education is still unfamiliar in Vietnam.

Since the beginning of 2020, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the colleges and universities throughout the country have shifted to online education as an alternative method of teaching and learning. To familiarize with a new teaching environment, lecturers have had to equip themselves with knowledge and skills needed to run a lecture smoothly and effectively on a specified learning platform. At the University of Mining and Geology (HUMG), Microsoft Office 365 has been assigned for online courses. At first, it seemed to put forward a real challenge to the users who have always been working in a traditional classroom where boards, chalks, and face-to-face environment are so familiar. The question of getting more involvement from students in online courses especially the English ones has been raised among the group of lecturers who wish not to be the monotalker, but the facilitator, the inspirer and the manager of the class.

The methodology of English teaching has always emphasized the importance of practice stage right after the presentation one and the procedure stays the same with online courses. In order to help the students practice the language phenonmena, the authors have been using different applications integrated in Office 365.

2. METHODS AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The major methods used in this study were material analysis and synthesis of the analyzed information. In the scope of this study, various activities used for practicing English in synchronous online courses were mentioned.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

In our online English course, it is essential to avoid the monotalk of the teacher. If the teacher dominated the class, there would be very little or even no time for the students to practice the language. English language teachers are mostly expertized in handling the practicing activities in a face-to-face classroom and when turning into online environment, it is advisable for them to best exploit the available applications. During the time of teaching online English course for the first year students at Hanoi University of Mining and Geology, the authors used different applications for practising English

elements such as grammar and vocabulary and also the four language skills as below.

3.1. Practising English elements

To help students practice English grammar and vocabulary, the authors used Quizizz, an application offered to create five question types: multiple choice, check box, fill-in-the-blank, poll, and open ended. After signing up Quizizz.com, the teacher can either create his/her own quizzes or freely use the online resources as he/she wishes. During online teaching, the teacher chose the Quizizz that best fit the grammar or vocabulary the students learned, showed the game code on the sharing screen in Teams group and let them play live on their own mobile phone or computer.. The activity could be ended at any suitable time and the results were shown on the screen. Then, each sentence was checked afterward so that the whole class could see the right answer. Quizizz is based on the form of game, so it attracts the students a lot with the competitiveness.

3.2. Practising four language skills

An offline class seems to be ideal environment for practicing English language skills. Yet, with the help of the applications, the teacher can also use a variety of activities in the practice stage.

3.2.1. Practising reading comprehension skill

To practice reading comprehension skill, the authors used the activities *Matching pairs* or *Time to climb* in Nearpod. For these types of activities, the teacher needs to sign up Nearpod, choose the *Matching pairs* or *Time to climb* activity and create his/her own task suitable with the reading requirement before the online class starts. During the class, a link to the Nearpod task will be sent to all students in Teams group and they start doing the task synchronously. When the teacher ends the activity, a report of the students's results will be sent to the teacher's registered e-mail as required. Quizizz is also used for practicing reading skill together with the students' textbooks. For each student also has his own textbooks, at this level New English File Pre-Intermediate and Key to English Test, the teacher can reconstruct the reading tasks in the textbooks in the form of Quizizz before hand and let the students play live answering the questions while reading the text in their book.

3.2.2. Practising speaking skill

For speaking skill, it will take a lot of time if the teacher looks at the student list and asks each student to answer the question or talk about the given situation or topic. Groupwork can be a solution to stimulate discussion among the students in an online course. Before handling the class, the teacher divides the whole group into smaller ones, in this case nine smaller groups. To do this in Ms Teams, the teacher can add more channels, and then add the students'names; for example, five students to each group and assign it a locked group, which means only members of this smaller group can join. During the class, when speaking practice stage comes, the teacher gives tasks to each group, then creates a separate meeting for each smaller group, asks the students to join their assigned meeting rooms and start their discussion. While the students are discussing their topic, the teacher can visit any group, gives them help if necessary.

3.2.3. Practising listening skill

To help the students practise listening skill in online course, the authors used the activity *Matching pairs* in Nearpod to create practice tasks like rearranging the pictures in the order mentioned in an audio. Another activity used is *Quiz* in Nearpod which is applied with the multiple choice listening tasks in the textbook Key to English Test. This type of activity offers a great advantage helping the teacher to insert images, audio or video files into online listening practice tasks.

3.2.4. Practising writing skill

Practicing writing skill in an online class, from the authors' points of view, seems to be

the most difficult to be handled effectively. While studying Nearpod, the authors found out a great use of the activity Collabration in Nearpod. This can also be called Collaborate board, on which the fast learners can send their writing ranging from sentence writing to note writing of 25-35 words in an assigned time without the fear of being copied from the slower ones. Only when the time is up and the teacher clicks on each writing, it will be possible for the whole group to see the answer and check it. If the answer is right, the teacher leaves it on the board, otherwise she will delete it. So after quickly checking the writing, the students can note down the correct answer that remains on the board.

Another application that the authors exploited to get students'ideas and opinions in the form of writing is Mentimeter. It can be simply carried out by asking the students to answer an open-ended question and the result layout can be either speech bubles, one by one or flowing grid. This activity allows spontaneous responses from the whole class and all the answers can be seen on the screen either with or without student's name as requested by the teacher.

3.3. Teaching implications

During the time teaching online courses for the two groups of first year students at HUMG and experiencing various activities, the authors gathered some teaching implications as followed.

- It is essential for the teacher to be able to run an online class smoothly to assure the least technical problems.
- To best exploit any activity, the teacher needs to spend time preparing the task carefully beforehand and makes sure that the activity well fits the lesson.
- It is advisable for the teacher to run a trial of the activity in a Teams group of his/her colleagues to see how it really works so that he/she can promptly adjust it if necessary.
- The teacher should start the online class with a warm-up activity like *Time to climb* which can help increase students'interest in the lesson.
- Mentimeter is a good application for whole class discussion where students have chances to give their own ideas at the same time.
- When using activities to practice speaking skill, the teacher ought to be good at timing as it takes time to go round the small groups.
- A game of Quizziz can be launched before the ending of the online lesson to see how well the students absorb the language elements.
- A proper time limit should be assigned for doing each activity to best suit the students' language abilities in the group.
- Games and activities are time-consuming so it should be taken into consideration for the teacher to choose which activity and how many acivities to teach in a lesson in order to achieve the lesson objective.
- For some technologically oriented teachers, it is advisable to avoid the overuse of technology in teaching online because technology is only the means to make teaching and learning process more effective.

4. CONCLUSION

Exploiting different activities in applications for online teaching and learning has always been hard but really worthy. This requires a lot of perseverence from the teacher who is not only the lecturer but also the instructor, the facilitator and the inspirer in the class. The result will be the students' achievement for the teacher is thought to be of great ability to cope with any difficulties occurred.

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