

Mansoor Almurar

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Digital Tools: More Than Just Entertainment

Growing up in a very conservative family, where I had to secretly download Hollywood movies and watch them with extreme care in order not to be punished, shaped the way I look at the West. The more they placed restrictions on what I could watch or do, the more I wanted to discover the secrets behind such limitations. As I grew older, the limitations diminished little by little until finally I had a chance to make my own decisions and come to the U.S. to discover the hidden secrets behind the culture I used to watch through my old Dell desktop screen.

On September 1, 2005, my KLM flight landed in Minneapolis. As I walked through the terminals trying to figure out my connecting flight gate, I was astonished by the number of plasma screens hanging at the walls of the airport. Finally after an extreme search, I found my connecting flight gate. I threw myself onto the black leather chair and stared at the hanging plasma T.V screen. It was during the Hurricane Katrina event and the news was covering the event very well. I was struck by the pictures of the devastating hurricane; however, what struck me more was something else. It was the subtitles that were appearing at the bottom of the screen reading what the commentator said. I kept reading the subtitles until I was startled by a word. It was "hurricane". I pulled out my newly bought electronic dictionary and looked up the definition of this word.

As an international student from Dubai, with limited academic background in English, I gained the most proficiency from watching Hollywood movies that I downloaded and watched

secretly, playing video games and reading English words over the Internet. Although we were taught English at school starting at middle school, it was digital tools that made the big difference. I was crazy about video games and would spend most of the time behind the screen playing Super Mario or King Kong. I loved the stories in them and would read the scripts word by word. I remember my brother would always whine at me telling me to pass the scripts. The computer has assisted me in learning English as well because I used to read English articles about the latest video games. Although I remember that I struggled in understanding the entire article, I would still get the basic message from it.

Today almost four years have passed since my arrival in the U.S. and I still wonder how vital a role digital tools played in my English learning process. In an attempt to seek an answer for such question, and to determine if my situation is unique, I have interviewed three international students and asked them how digital technology such as radio and computers etc. played a key role in facilitating their English language proficiency.

The three international students I interviewed were from China, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and all had varying levels of English expertise. Jackson from China is a freshman majoring in accounting. He was born and raised in China and had very little background in English before coming to the U.S. Sultan, a young guy from Saudi Arabia who just finished his sophomore year, was raised in a conservative family. Before coming to the U.S., he had a moderate English proficiency, mostly gained through watching TV series and surfing the net. My third interviewee was Abdulaziz from Qatar, a relatively small country with the shape of a peninsula situated at the Persian Gulf. He had a decent level of English proficiency and claims that he learned English prior to coming to the U.S. through extensive traveling, using the internet and listening to western music.

The extreme advances in technology over the past few decades have changed the way people read and write. Both computers and globalization have created a global culture where anyone can interact with, and be exposed to, different cultures. Since the English language is becoming more global, there is an urgent feeling by people to learn English in order to be successful in their lives. Schools around the world are trying to implement the English language at an early age to secure that future generations possess a strong English proficiency. However, the language is usually implemented and taught not very effectively where most people learn the language from outside sources. Jackson from China explains,

I grew up in a generation where English was a big deal. The Chinese government just had started to focus on teaching Chinese kids English in schools at an early age. I remember my parents would always push me to do my English homework. It was boring because we just learned how to memorize letters rather than fully digest the language. The humble background I had in English prior to coming to the States came from my curiosity to learn this global language. When I was a kid, I would always watch Chinese movies with English subtitles. In addition, I always listened to western hip hop & R&B music. Although it was not much, it gave me some foundations of the English language.

Sultan from Saudi Arabia had a unique situation. Although he was raised in a conservative family, he had some freedom to watch most stuff that interested him. Sultan had a moderate level of English proficiency gained through a combination of school and external digital technologies. He maintains,

I don't deny the role of school of giving me the basics of the English language. At school I was taught the basics of the language such as the alphabet and basic common English words but at home I enhanced my language through various sources. For example, I watched the *Friends* series. In addition, I used to watch the Oprah show every Friday. When I was a kid, my role models were Mel Gibson and Steven Seagal. I would always watch their movies over and over without being bored. So I would say that T.V. was a very crucial tool for my English learning process.

When I first met Abdulaziz back in 2005, I was shocked by his high level of English proficiency. Abdulaziz grew up in a bilingual family where his parents talked English pretty

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well. He was educated in a private school with a huge emphasis on English language. I told him that he was lucky to have such access to the English language at an early age. He laughed and said,

Yes, I know that my early education was extremely important in my English learning process. However, I did not make the most of it because I hated school and I did not like academic language. I have improved my English through traveling around. I love computers and would spend most of my time in front of the screen reading articles, listening to music and even chatting with people from all over the world. Therefore, the Internet has boosted my English proficiency because it allowed me to enhance my English language without being bored with rigid academic language as I used to feel at school.

The United States is one of the leading countries in technology and media. After being here for four years, I realize how this has been important to me as an international student to be surrounded by numerous digital technologies. However, I wanted to see how this played a role in my interviewees' cases. Jackson did not have access to computers back in China due to lack of resources. Once he came to the U.S., he had more access to computers because he was able to use the university computer lab for free. He claims that the introduction of computers in his life has contributed vastly to the way he reads and writes in English. He explains,

The computer offered me a lot more opportunities to access various English sources online. For example, I can read articles and news online without having to buy books. This saved me a lot of time and money. The best part about computers is that they offered me quick translations from English to Chinese. In this way, I can learn English much faster and easier. In the writing part, software such as Microsoft Word helped me improve my grammar and spelling because it corrects my spelling mistakes and gives me hints to grammar structure issues.

Sultan claimed that his major problem with English was the lack of vocabulary he had. He said that once he started learning English at the ELC (English Language Center), he struggled with his reading assignments because he was not able to fully understand the texts. He stated that he enhanced his vocabulary through various English learning websites. In addition, he said that here in the U.S. he had more access to watch movies either at home or in the movie theater.

Moreover, he likes to listen to BBC radio where he can stay updated with current world events.

When I asked him how this has helped him improve his vocabulary, he proclaimed,

I usually spend most of my free time watching movies at home or listening to the radio station while working on my school assignment. I would always encounter new words that were not familiar to me. I would search for the word over the Internet and look up its definition. Being in the U.S. where I am continuously exposed to the English language through digital technology has significantly assisted me in evolving my English language deficiencies.

In order to conduct the interview with Abdulaziz, I went over to his place in the Cherry Creek area. As I entered his apartment, the number of digital tools playing all at once amazed me. There was an I-pod with western music playing at the corner, a Samsung plasma screen playing *Rush Hour* movie, and Abdulaziz was sitting on the couch with his laptop. I sat by him and took a peek at the laptop screen. He was reading an article about the latest Detroit car show because Abdulaziz is a big fan of cars. He spends most of his free time either reading news or watching the latest car shows on T.V. I wanted to know if he had better access to car information by being here in the U.S. and he replied,

Back home my main source for car information was the Internet. In my country, we don't have many T.V. channels that cover the latest reports on cars and that's why I do not watch T.V. frequently. While here in the U.S. I have many channels such as the Motor Sports channel. Therefore, I always watch T.V. here in the U.S.

When I asked him about whether this has helped him improve his English, he answered, "Of course! I am always watching this channel and I have improved my listening skills, in addition to the numerous vocabularies I have gained through their daily programs."

After researching and interviewing international students with varying levels of English expertise, I have reached an answer to my question. Digital technologies are not just entertainment tools; instead, they play a crucial role in assisting international students in learning English. What makes digital technologies very useful is the variety of topics they offer their

users. Although my upbringing was unique due to my family's beliefs, I see that there is a very close connection between my experience with digital tools and my interviewees' experience. Thus, based on my interviews with the above mentioned individuals, I find that digital technology does indeed aid international students in learning English.

Since the world is becoming increasingly globalized and English has become the global language for both business and politics, every tool to facilitate the learning of English is important. This holds especially true for older adults who often find learning a new language difficult. Since this study shows a close correlation between gaining English fluency and digital technology, I wonder if further study with a larger demographic might also reveal the same results.