

Using E-Learning to Develop EFL Students' Language Skills and Activate Their Independent Learning

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Abstract

The report presents the advantages of the E-learning Moodle and its role in enhancing “English Foreign language” (EFL) students’ language skills and independent learning. An already running and established virtual learning environment, namely the E-learning Moodle software, is being used successfully in the British University in Egypt. The different activities and resources that are provided by E-learning have been described with an analysis of how they can be used to develop EFL students’ language proficiency and independent learning.

Keywords

E-Learning Moodle, B-Learning, Independent Learning, English as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Increasing EFL students’ language skills and independent learning are issues of paramount concern because the contact hours in traditional face to face classes are not enough to help students develop their language skills. The E-Learning Moodle is an interactive tool that could be used to address this issue, as it could activate and increase EFL students’ language skills as they are exposed to the language outside the classroom and work independently on improving their language skills. The E-Learning Moodle is used in the British University of Egypt and it is used in teaching English for Academic Purposes. This paper will show how to use the E-Learning Moodle to improve students’ language skills and activate their independent learning. It will start with the definition of E-Learning and its different types, and then it will discuss advantages and disadvantages of E-Learning, and next it will give a recommendation and finally, draw a conclusion.

2. Definition of E-Learning

E-Learning was defined by many researchers. Waterhouse (2003) defined it as a medium of computer technology that could be utilized to develop the application of learning and teaching. Moreover, The European Commission (2001) defines e-learning as “the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration”. Using a narrower concept, Rosenberg (2001) stated that e-learning permits data saving, sharing and updating while Horton (2006) believes that e-learning allows the building up of “learning experiences of information and computer technology”. It is important to note that all definitions agree to the fact that e-learning involves using computer technology to facilitate and enhance learning. E-Learning in this paper refers to the E-Learning Moodle that is used by institutions to enhance teaching and learning and to motivate students’ independent learning.

3. Types of E-Learning

The literature acknowledges five types of e-learning. The five categories are e-learning that is learner-led, instructor-led, embedded, facilitated, and telementored (Horton & Horton, 2003; Ilie & Pavel, 2006; Kokkosis, Charitopoulos, Prekas, & Athanasopoulou, 2006; Gulbahar, 2009). While Learner-led e-learning provides course material to students (Horton, 2006 as cited in Esgi, 2013), facilitated e-learning allows student discussion via Forums and Chats that are related to an assignment (Ilie & Pavel, 2006). As for embedded e-learning, it is when teachers embed videos and web pages to enhance students’ learning. The latter is different from instructor-led e-learning which consists of instructors’ presentations via real-time webcast technology which could include audio and video conferences, speaking, screen sharing and whiteboard applications. Students’ direct participation here is via audio, video or instant messages (Ruiz J.G.; Mintzer M.J.; Leipzig 2006 as cited in Esgi, 2013). Last but not least is the telementored e-learning which involves a combination of distance learning and the use of technology. For example, students are given printed material, and then instructors provide them with extra guidance and information about this material via video conferences, instant messages and internet phones (Gulbahar, 2009). E-Learning in this paper refers to the E-Learning Moodle. The word MOODLE “was originally an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment” (Nedeva & Dimova, 2010). It includes a mixture of learner-led, facilitated and embedded types of E-Learning as will be explained below in the components of the E-learning Moodle.

4. The Components of the E-Learning Moodle and Their Effect on Language Proficiency and Independent Learning

The E-learning Moodle has two main components, namely activities and resources. The activities include assignment, chat, choice, Database, External Tool, Forum, Glossary, Hotpot, lesson, Quiz, SCORM Package, Survey, Wiki, and Workshop. The following is a brief explanation of each activity and resource component according to the British University of Egypt’s (BUE) E-Learning Moodle:

4.1. E-Learning Activities

The following E-learning activities could be used to enhance students’ language proficiency and independent learning as will be explained at the end of each activity.

Chat: The chat activity module enables participants to have text-based, real-time synchronous discussions. These discussions develop students’ fluency and are a springboard for exchanging ideas and experiences. Thus, students’ independent learning develops as they are engaged in acquiring information from others without the help or intrusion of instructors.

Choice: The choice activity module enables a teacher to ask a single question and offer a selection of possible responses. It is useful when teachers want to stimulate students’ thinking via a poll or would like to test their understanding. This again allows them to use the language and to be exposed to their peers’ views through votes. Independent learning here is acquired through students’ accessing these polls and being able to analyse their results outside class whenever it is convenient and at their own pace.

Database: The database activity module enables participants to create, maintain and search a collection of entries (*i.e.* records). The structure of the entries is defined by the teacher as a number of fields. Field types in-

clude checkbox, radio buttons, dropdown menu, text area, URL, picture and uploaded file. Students could gain information via different means that could tailor for different learning styles. By reading text their vocabulary and grammar improves and while listening to audio material their pronunciation develops. The database material could be accessed at any time according to the students' preferences which encourages independent learning.

External Tool: The external tool activity module enables students to interact with learning resources and activities on other web sites. For example, an external tool could provide access to a new activity type or learning materials from a publisher. This interaction has a positive effect on students' language skills as it makes them read the available resources independently.

Forum: The forum activity module enables participants to have asynchronous discussions *i.e.* discussions that take place over an extended period of time. The Forum effect is similar to the Chat in its allowing students to share and exchange their ideas and experiences independently, with or without their instructor's participation. Moreover, E-learning Forums and Chats develop students' personal identity (Bing Wu, 2012) as they become familiar with their own identity and the personality of others.

Glossary: The glossary activity module enables participants to create and maintain a list of definitions, like a dictionary, or to collect and organise resources or information. Students can compile new vocabulary which could be shared with others; this could eventually lead to building up the students' vocabulary. They could brainstorm ideas for a project or class essay and become exposed to their classmates' ideas which stimulate interest in the topic that is discussed. This glossary could encourage students to work independently on enlarging it with all the new vocabulary and definitions that they learn throughout and after their university stage.

Hotpot: The HotPot activity allows teachers to distribute interactive learning materials to their students via Moodle and view reports on the students' responses and results. The e-learning exercise may be a static web page or an interactive web page which offers students text, audio and visual prompts and records their responses. This motivates independent learning as students get to attempt the exercises and get instant feedback. The prompts push them to use the language as they read, watch and listen. Teachers could ask students to write after going through the text, audio and visual prompts. Thus they practise the four language skills which improve their proficiency and simultaneously, motivates their independent learning.

Lesson: The lesson activity enables a teacher to deliver content and/or practice activities in interesting and flexible ways, such as, multiple choice, matching and short answer questions. The activity could be done by students independently and it will test their understanding of the content. Depending on the students' choice of answer and how the teacher develops the lesson, students may progress to the next page, be taken back to a previous page or be redirected down a different path entirely and this solidifies independent learning.

Quiz: The quiz activity enables a teacher to create quizzes comprising questions of various types, including multiple choice, matching, short-answer and numerical. The teacher can allow the quiz to be attempted multiple times, with the questions shuffled or randomly selected from the question bank. A time limit may be set and the students could access the quiz independently and learn from their mistakes if the teacher provides them with answers.

SCORM Package: A SCORM Package is a collection of files and content is usually displayed over several pages, with navigation between the pages. There are various options for displaying content in a pop-up window, with a table of contents and navigation buttons. Furthermore, content could be uploaded as a zip file and added to a course. A SCORM Package may be used for presenting multimedia content and animations as well as an assessment tool. This could be accessed by students at any time and they will be able to watch, read and listen to the content material which will improve their language skills and encourage them to work independently.

Survey: The survey activity module provides a number of verified survey instruments and these survey tools are pre-populated with questions.

Workshop: The workshop activity module enables the collection, review and peer assessment of students' work. Students can submit any digital content (files), such as word-processed documents or spreadsheets and can also type text directly into a field using the text editor. Students are given the opportunity to assess one or more of their peers' submissions. Submissions and reviewers may be anonymous if required. This helps them learn independently from their peers' errors and their submission of digital content improves their writing skills.

Wiki: The wiki activity module enables participants to add and edit a collection of web pages. A wiki can be collaborative, with everyone being able to edit it, or individual, where everyone has their own wiki which only they can edit. Participating in a wiki encourages students to read other students' writing and motivates them to

write independently.

4.2. E-Learning Resources

The following E-learning resources could be used by students' independently at their own pace to enhance their language proficiency as they access information in different forms which tailors to their different learning styles thus becoming independently immersed in the language.

Book: The book module enables a teacher to create a multi-page resource in a book-like format, with chapters and subchapters. Books can contain media files as well as text.

File: The file module enables a teacher to provide a file as a course resource. It could be used to share presentations given in a class or to share a mini website or draft files of certain software programs as Photoshop.

Folder: The folder module enables a teacher to display a number of related files inside a single folder, reducing scrolling on the course page.

IMS content package: An IMS content package is a collection of files and there are various options for displaying content in a pop-up window, with a navigation menu or buttons. An IMS content package may be used for presenting multimedia content and animations and content could be uploaded as a zip file.

Label: The label module enables text and multimedia to be inserted into the course page in between links to other resources and activities. It could be used to split up a long list of activities with a subheading or an image, to display an embedded sound file or video directly on the course page and to add a short description to a course section.

Page: The page enables a teacher to create a web page resource using the text editor. A page can display text, images, sound, video, web links and embedded code, such as Google maps. The page could be used to present the terms and conditions of a course or a summary of the course syllabus and to embed several videos or sound files together with some explanatory text.

URL: The URL module enables a teacher to provide a web link as a course resource. Anything that is freely available online, such as documents or images, can be linked to the students.

5. An Analysis of the E-Learning Moodle

5.1. The Advantages of the E-Learning Moodle

- It is an interactive and appealing mode of instruction and learning.
- It motivates students and increases their global awareness (Meloni, 1998).
- It encourages learners to work independently as each student can work on different tasks with the “integrated learning environment” (Wu et al., 2012). In other words, it addresses differentiation and it allows students to work according to their own pace. Advanced learners could thus be able to work faster and finish more activities than novice learners (Nedeva & Dimova, 2010). This makes students keep their personal schedules as they work at their own place and according to their own preferences.
- It improves students' language skills as they practice reading, listening, speaking and writing via the different E-learning resources and tasks.
- It increases human sustainability as students acquire skills, attitudes and attributes that benefit themselves and others and lasts in the long-term future (Irwin, D., 2012).
- It appeals to students' different learning styles as they can choose from a variety of activities and resources. It allows students who are introverts the chance to interact virtually through Forums and Chats which improves their communicative competency.
- It increases students' study time of English over the week (Fryer et al., 2014) which improves their overall language proficiency.

5.2. The Disadvantages of the E-Learning Moodle

- The absence of face-to-face teaching and body language could lead to its becoming a “solitary activity” because E-learning social interactions are mainly virtual and different from face-to-face classroom interaction.
- The lack of an actual teacher's one-to-one face-to-face feedback may be difficult for some students who might not be comfortable with virtual feedback.

- Some students may not be able to use it if they do not have Internet access.
- It leads to a decrease of social relations between students (Mohammedi et al., 2010).
- Novice learners may be unable to participate if they lack human support (Nielson, 2011).

6. Recommendations

Despite the above mentioned drawbacks the recommendation of the author is to use E-learning together with face-to-face learning, as the former is supported by the latter. The E-Learning Moodle is being used at the British University in Egypt to supplement all Modules that are taught in face-to-face classes. It has proved successful, as students reach the intended learning objectives by this blended type of learning in which the concept conveys the idea of “blend” and refers to different situations in which technology is used to complement classroom activities (Dziuban et al., 2004). Heinze and Procter (2004) define it as “learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course”. Thus, it is via E and b-learning that teaching and learning could be enhanced and developed, as students work in and outside the class which makes modules “more participated, interactive and student-centered” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Working outside class encourages students to study independently using the E-learning interactive activities and thus spend more time engaged and immersed in the English language which improves their language proficiency.

7. Conclusion

E-learning is an essential tool that should be used to supplement the EFL face-to-face class. It includes various activities and resources that if used by the students and monitored by the teacher could enhance the students’ language proficiency and independent learning. As the world progresses, we need to utilize technology and to synchronize ourselves with it. The wide variety of activities and resources on the E-learning Moodle needs to be activated in the English language Modules to increase the time that students interact with the language and motivate them to work independently and thus eventually they become life-long learners.

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