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Introducing Educational Technology, Moodle at Nizwa College of Technology
A Case Study
Lucas Kohnke

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Abstract

This paper discusses how and why educational technology, Moodle, was introduced in the foundation program at Nizwa College of Technology (NCT), Oman in 2009-2010. It elucidates the issues that the author faced trying to introduce Moodle for the first time in the English Language Department at NCT.

Introduction

The introduction of computer technology and specifically the Internet has had significant effects on second/foreign language teaching and learning. Computer technology serves as an excellent tool for language acquisition and research has shown that students are highly motivated when using computers (Jaeglin 1998) and hence learn better when they are relaxed and motivated. In today's dynamic and fast moving world computer literacy has become an essential necessity for good job prospects in the Middle East. Electronic literacy refers to a framework how people use computers to interpret and express meaning "the ability to find, organize, and make use of information...and how to read and write in a new medium" (Warschauer and Kern, 2000, pg. 173).

Currently, students at Nizwa College of Technology (NCT), Oman have a very limited knowledge of computer usage. To help the students become more familiar with computers and to improve their English acquisition this paper will introduce why Moodle with its built in functions were chosen as the medium and how it enhanced the students' learning.

Background

Nizwa College of Technology has been in existence since 1993 and is one of seven colleges of Technologies run by the Ministry of Manpower in Oman. The students in the college come from a variety of backgrounds: farms, deserts and cities. The goal of Nizwa College of Technology is to provide the students with technological and administrative knowledge in accordance with the requirements of the labor market.

The English Language Center teaches English as a second language to Omani nationals. The center offers two programs: the Foundation program and the Post-Foundation courses. The English Language Center is supported by 50 teachers from different countries, such as Scotland, England, USA and India amongst others. The center is equipped with the following facilities: Computer/Multimedia laboratories, Self-Access Center, Conference Rooms, Internet and Intranet services.

All classrooms in the buildings are reserved for only English classes and they are set up with chairs with small tables attached to the right arm. Each room is equipped with a blackboard or smart board, overhead projector and cassette/CD player with speakers.

The Foundation English language program aims at developing students communication skills in English so as to meet the academic requirements of the Post-Foundation specializations (IT, Engineering, Business, and Science).

Since Nizwa College of Technology is a technological college it is natural that teaching is geared towards real communication rather than a demonstration of target grammar and vocabulary.

Computer Assisted Language Learning

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) appeared in the 1960s. Levy (1997) defines CALL as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (pg1). Computers have changed tremendously since the 1960s and changed how we communicate with each other. Computers continue to make an impact in our daily lives, therefore, incorporating computer technology in the classroom has become common around the world and it has been proven a great tool for language acquisition and was the natural step at NCT.

According to Warschauer CALL can be divided into three distinct categories. Namely, *behavioristic* CALL with was introduced in the 1960-1970s and focus on repetitive language - drill and practice. The rationale behind were that repetitive exposure to the same material will be

beneficial for language acquisition. Second, *communicative* CALL which adhere to the communicative approach to teaching which became very popular in the 1970-1980s. Underwood (1998) was a strong advocate of this method and argued that communicative call focuses more on using forms than on the forms themselves. Finally, *integrative* CALL which is based on two important innovations multimedia computers and the Internet (Warschauer 1996, Computer Assisted Language Learning: An Introduction).

Internet it is a great tool for learners to practice the target language by interacting with each other or native speakers. The internet can satisfy both input and interaction which are the two most important factors in successful second/foreign language learning. Furthermore, language input on the web is almost always authentic which contributes even more to their learning. The computer is a "medium in which a variety of methods, approaches, and pedagogical philosophies may be implemented" (Garret, 1991 p. 75). It should be noted that the effectiveness of CALL is in how it is put to use.

Technology and Omani Students

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been around for over 40 years but has not been embraced as a form of educational medium at this college until recently. The students are not used to using computers; in fact, many of them have rarely used a computer or *surf*ed the Internet prior to their enrollment. This does not imply that they are technophobes instead they have not had the opportunity to embrace computer technology compared to their equivalents in the Western World where today's young people can be described as digital native. As such they are not comfortable or confident and feel anxious using computers!

Warschauer and Kern points out that the literacy and communication skill in new on-line media is critical to success in almost all walks of life (pg. 171) and a NetDay survey released in 2004 asserts that technology has become "an indispensable tool in the education of today's students (*NetDay News* 2004). Therefore, a program using some of the functions available in Moodle Moodle has been introduced as the standard template used for online activities at NCT and is an acronym for "Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment." Moodle has an open source license and is freely available. See <http://moodle.org/> (accessed May 21, 2009). as well as MSN/Yahoo Messenger was devised to introduce our students to the possibilities in using computer technology to enhance their language learning experience. MSN/Yahoo messenger was decided to be used later in the course after the students had become familiar with using Moodle as we wanted all students to have an email account outside the school and they are the most widely used email clients as well as messenger(s).

Moodle

To enhance autonomous learning as well as in-class learning Moodle was introduced during the academic semester in 2008-2009 for Advanced Level Foundation students. Moodle is a free

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Course Management Software (CMS) also known as Learning Management System (LMS) or as a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (See <http://moodle.org/>) that is “currently used by more than 56 percent of higher education establishments in the United Kingdom and has been adopted by the Open University in the UK, the largest distance education provider in the world” (Dudeney & Hockly p. 153). Perhaps the largest advantage of using CMS is that one can create a “blended-learning course involving face-to-face teaching, supported by online teaching using the synchronous and asynchronous tools within the system” (Sharma & Barrett, p. 108). Furthermore, studies on CMS such as Moodle present evidence that the amount of language produced by each learner increases when compared to face-to-face interaction (Beauvois, 1992; Kelm, 1992; Warschauer, 1996).

The rationale for using a CMS such as Moodle over other similar ones (Blackboard, WebCT) was that Moodle is free; anyone can download Moodle and run it on their server. Moodle offers features such as course information, discussion boards, online quizzes and assessment collection and has several advantages for both students and staff, namely, access at any time, from anywhere; resources are always available: an online reading is never *out on loan*; A one-stop-shop for all course-related documents, communication and activities. Hence, Moodle includes all the elements that we would like to use. Furthermore, Moodle has been adopted by the Ministry of Manpower as the official VLE for all Colleges of Technology and thus was the natural choice of medium.

By using Moodle as our platform we are able to control the online environment which is imperative in a traditional Muslim society and introduce each aspect of it slowly and methodically (there are cultural aspects of online usage that might alienate and hence demotivate some students). This serves to enhance the washback effect since learners can lose enthusiasm if they don't comprehend or agree with the purpose of technology-based activities (Warschauer 2008, pg. 210) and if used inappropriately it can do as much harm as good. Three specific functions of Moodle were decided to be introduced: blogs, chat, and email. These three were chosen to give the learners' more exposure to the target language through real communication and also for the relatively easiness to use.

Computer Access

While it is becoming more and more popular for students to have access to Internet at home or those who can afford to visit Internet Cafés the majority of our students' come from difficult financial backgrounds and hence very few have any of these capabilities. In order to avoid the situation that some students become disadvantaged simply because of their lack of access to computers, certain steps were taken. Students in the advanced level were given priority to use the Self Access Center (SAC) in the department (where computers and technical support are available) where students have access to computer for self-study purposes for free eight hours a day. By using SAC, we minimized the financial problem due to the inaccessibility to appropriate resources.

Preparation

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In order to avoid their situation as disadvantage learners, all of them received training inside the classroom as well as in front of the computer. All of them were given a handout which clearly lay out all the steps that were required from accessing the computer at the SAC to login in and how to use the different functions on Moodle. Their initial Moodle training consisted of us meeting them in their classroom, discussing their handout(s), bringing them all down together to the SAC and helping them to log in and use the blog, chat and email function. This helped them to familiarize themselves with the SAC as well as the online environment. These steps were repeated an additional two times as requested by the students.

Netiquette

Netiquette refers to a set of rules for behaving online (Shea, The Core Rules of Netiquette, 2005). Since our students are fairly new to communicating electronically it was important to introduce them to the proper way of behaving in an online community. The most cited suggestions for online user are the following: think first; write in upper and lower case; avoid abbreviations; be concise; avoid smiley's; don't flame; don't take offense easily; don't evangelize; and know the audience (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997, pg 5). These suggestions plus basic text-chat familiarization were given to our students in form of through relevant reading passages.

Students were asked to look around, spend a while reading the archives or listening to the chat people contributing. To get a sense of how the people who are already there act – to remember that those are real people out there. Only after that were they told to go ahead and participate. Misunderstandings can occur especially when a second language is being used between two different cultural groups and we tried hard to minimize this to occur. It should be noted that it is the individual online user who play the biggest role in encouraging netiquette standards of politeness and courtesy.

Rationale

By focusing on Blogs, Chat and Emails we teach a few of the new literacies they will need to function in today's information age. Using these as a medium of writing can go a long way to teach skills such as research, organization and synthesis of ideas (Richardson 2009). Also, by writing to each other their writing becomes communicative and has a real purpose.

Research has found that Internet interaction help learners to gain input in the language learning process (Kitao, 1998). Synchronous communication of ESL learners helps them develop fluency, with students having to react and communicate in real times and real situations (Wiburg & Butker Pasceo, 2002). Whereas asynchronous can help develop deeper thinking skills, with time for writers to consider accuracy, develop an argument, and rewrite their contributions (Sharma & Barrett, 2008, pg 105). More importantly, there is less teacher and more student *talk* in computer classes.

Our students have no prior writing habit – therefore – it is important to make them comfortable as writers in English. By using these mediums with the right activities – with appropriate levels of challenge – and with enough language and information they will be able to complete the writing *task(s)* successfully and hence their confidence in writing in English will increase (Harmer pg. 61). The most obvious advantage to use these mediums is that they provide *real-world* tool for the students to practice their written English. In the case of blogs and emails students were asked to prepare their entries in Word prior to submitting to encourage spell check and peer review.

Online everyone is given equal space (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996); even the shy students will have an opportunity to contribute without feeling anxious. As they continue to participate, they also will take ownership of the blog, chat or email and become more motivated.

We used Blogs, Chat and Email to focus on particular subject. For example, students that will be studying business composed business email or memo's and posted them on their blogs, which allowed them and their friends to reflect on it later using the blog archive. This had high face validity since they can see they are writing what they will be writing in their professional life.

Cognitive Approach

Cognitive approach to communicative language teaching is based not on habit formation but rather on instinctive cognitive knowledge in interaction with clear meaningful language. There are several technologies which support cognitive approach to language learning, which allow learners maximum opportunity to interact with meaning-rich contexts through which they construct and acquire competence in the language (Warschauer, M. and Meskill, 2000). Examples of these types of technologies include text-reconstruction software, concordance software, telecommunications, and multimedia software.

Socio-Cognitive Approach

In contrast to the cognitive approach this one emphasis the social aspect of language acquisition. Students are given maximum opportunity for authentic social interaction to give students practice in the kinds of communication they will later engage in outside the classroom (Warschauer, M. and Meskill, 2000). Examples of these types of technologies include Blogs, Chat and Email. These have been called social software(s) and are thus powerful tools for supporting a socio-cognitive approach to teaching.

Blogs

The name blog is a shortened form of web log (Sharma & Barrett, 2008, pg. 19). Basically, they are websites to which bloggers (author(s)) engage readers with ideas and questions and links (Richardson, 2009, pg. 18). By using the built in blog function in Moodle, students learned to read more critically, think about the reading more analytically, and write more clearly. At the

same time they build relationships with peers and teachers within a safe and controlled weblog environment.

Blogs are a great way of connecting students with others outside the classroom via e-mail and chat. Using blogs will “facilitate all sorts of reflection and metacognitive analysis that was previously much more cumbersome” Richardson, 2009, pg. 27). With the help of blogs teachers and students are becoming much more aware about themselves and what is happening around them.

To start, we asked students to find any relevant information that interested them and post links to those on their blogs. The male students all posted about football and cars whereas the female students posted about a variety of things, such as tourism, cars, weather and movies. Then we taught them how to write about what they found useful at those sites. They could use their personal blog – to publish personal reflections to topics covered in class. All students were encouraged to visit each other’s blogs and comment on what their friends had posted.

There were a couple of *issues* to using the blog at the beginning. First, students posted personal information such as their phone numbers and posted messages in Arabic. However, thanks to RSS everything was reviewed before being posted.

Chat

Another name for communicate through synchronous Network Based Communication (NBC) is to chat (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, pg. 61). In introducing chat to our students Moodle’s built in message function was first used and later Microsoft/Yahoo messenger were used because of their specific features, they closely resembles oral communication and it is the most widely used messenger in Oman. Since chatting has many similarities to oral interaction, “it is only logical to assume that language practice through NBC will reap some of the same benefits for second language development as practice through oral interaction” (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, pg. 50). Also, chatting will increase the motivation and decrease the nervousness for using the target language (Kern 1995).

When a text chat partner has not understood the message, they will tell him or her, forcing the learner/writer to rephrase his or her message. This *negotiating of meaning* can arguable work towards improving young learners’ language abilities. However, if there is not a teacher, it is quite likely that learners will continue to replicate their mistakes or not take advantage of the learning opportunities provided by the activity. Therefore, students were encouraged to chat to their teachers when both parties were available. No specific time was given, instead they were asked to find each other online. Afterwards, they were asked to reflect on their experience and produce a short written summary either to be posted on their blog or sent as an email to their teacher. They were specifically asked to say who they spoke with, what was discussed, how long it took place and how they felt about it.

There were some disadvantages when using chat at the beginning. The main advantage was there typing ability. The majorities of the students are slower typist and found it difficult to keep up with the rapid response from their teachers. But as they continued to type their typing speed increased. Another disadvantage was that some students found it confusing with overlapping turns.

E-mail

E-mail is one of the most used Information and Communication Technology tools today (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007, pg 62). Therefore, it was natural to get the students involved both professionally and personally in using emails. Townshend (1997) and Warschauer (2008) have discussed and given suggestion on the use of email in language learning. However, they focused more on the effectiveness rather on efficiency as many of their suggestions require inter-school or even international co-operation. While this is possible it was not the focus of our e-ctivities which were to get students feeling comfortable using email by contacting their teacher and friends on a bi-weekly if not on a weekly basis.

Holliday (1999) found that electronic communication in the form of emails provides a range and distributive frequency of linguistic features comparable with other genres of writing and speaking. Furthermore, he imply “that the repetitive nature of email, in which writers quote and comment on each other’s message, assist learners in understanding linguistics cues” (Warschauer, 2008, pg. 109). Peyton (2000) describes similar experiences that he found in his research which he calls language scaffolding.

Students were encouraged to email their teachers every other week, to ask questions about assignments, homework or just to say hello. Teachers were encouraged to send pre-lesson task and notices regarding any changes to the class.

Composing and reading emails allow students more opportunity to use the target language and hence they will improve. The obvious advantage is that email is relatively easy to use and that it is something that they will use later in life. Students were encouraged to use their school email accounts (same as their Moodle account) in contacting their teachers but later in the course we helped all students to register for either a hotmail or yahoo account.

Conclusion

To be literate in the 21st century means to be able not only to read and write but to use the computer. The introduction of computer technology and specifically the Internet has had significant effects on communicating, teaching and learning. It provides an important medium for second language learners to communicate with native speakers in real situations, improving their overall skills and learning more specific about the target culture. The Internet has changed how teachers and students interact with each other and increased the participation.

At first students were first apprehensive about posting notes on blogs, sending emails and chatting to each other and their teachers. However, as they grew more and more accustomed to using them they realized that Internet is a fantastic tool to practice their English. Student found it practical to contact their teachers by email when they had individual questions and posted notes on the teachers' blogs when they had questions about something that they thought would benefit everyone. At the end it became apparent that chatting was the most popular medium of interaction since they received instant replies and after a while they started to use more complex language. Students are now evaluating the content on the Web for authenticity and are becoming critical communicators.

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