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Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) and Virtual Classrooms: Edmodo

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Abstract

In our present day, language teaching should not be limited to classroom environments. Learners should be provided with real and authentic language learning environments where they can learn language whenever they want. Therefore, this brings a lifelong learning process. Language learning should go beyond the walls of the classrooms and it should also take place everywhere. Depending upon the outcomes of the curriculum, one of the most effective ways for achieving this goal is the use of “virtual classrooms” to continue language teaching and learning outside classrooms. The aim of this presentation is to explain how virtual classrooms can be used to achieve the outcomes of the curriculum. Edmodo, a web 2.0 software, is one of the examples of virtual classrooms that provides a free access and application via PCs and mobile devices. It has been applied at Samsun 19 May University, ELT Dept. at “Teaching English to Young Learners” and “Teaching Language Skills” courses by the researcher. Students have been taken part in different applications of Edmodo not only in classes but also at their houses. Its mobile device application provides easiness to the students to follow their courses and assignments and give feedback. Edmodo also gives a chance to the language teachers to share different information to the students and check their assignments as an authentic assessment technique. Most of the students have stated that Edmodo is a really effective language teaching / learning software and it gives them an opportunity to compensate, review and recycle the courses.

Key words: virtual learning environments, Edmodo, lifelong learning, e-learning

Introduction

The 2nd – 8th Grades English Curriculum (MEB-TTKB, 2014) encourages the integration of technology in all aspects of English language teaching and learning because technological tools match the dynamic and interactive nature of the language as well as the learners’ interests and real -life experiences. In addition, fostering learner autonomy is any other important principle adopted in this new English curriculum. Authentic assessment tools and techniques are also included in the new 9th -12th grades English programs. Throughout the curriculum, in line with the alternative assessment principles, learners are asked to show what they can do and produce rather than what they are able to recall and reproduce (Huerta-Macias, 2002).

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The new curriculum encourages the integration of technology in all aspects of English language teaching and learning because technological tools appeal the adolescents' interests and real-life experiences. Learning tools and materials are increasingly being delivered electronically (Tomlinson, 2012) through electronic devices and the new curriculum of English is designed to be in synch with the recent developments in education and provide learners with an up-to date foundation for learning English (MEB-TTK, 2014). In addition to these, it must be concluded that language teachers should know how to direct their students to the other language learning environments except formal classrooms. Therefore, language teachers should be encouraged to use technological applications in their professional life to achieve the outcomes of the curriculum proposed by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE).

To this end, language learning and teaching should not be limited to classroom settings. Learners should be provided with varied alternative learning environments which help them increase their curiosity and motivation. One of the most practical and effective ways of these environments is virtual language classroom. One of these virtual classrooms, namely Edmodo, can easily be used in every steps of language teaching and learning.

Virtual Learning and virtual learning environments

Virtual learning is about the learning that takes place outside of the school, or bringing what is outside of the school into the school. So, we are thinking about the online environment as a way of connecting students who may be located physically in a school with their learning that is somewhere else (<http://core-ed.org/legacy/thought-leadership/ten-trends/ten-trends-2013/virtual-learning>).

Virtual learning comes in several forms:

- Computer-Based: Instruction is not provided by a teacher; instead, instruction is provided by software installed on a local computer or server. This software can frequently customize the material to suit the specific needs of each student.

- Internet-Based: This is similar to computer-based instruction, but in this case, the software that provides the instruction is delivered through the Web and stored on a remote server.

- Remote Teacher Online: Instruction is provided by a teacher, but that teacher is not physically present with the student. Instead, the teacher interacts with the student via the Internet, through such media as online video, online forums, e-mail and instant messaging.

- Blended Learning: This combines traditional face-to-face instruction, directed by a teacher, with computer-based, Internet-based or remote teacher online instruction. In effect, instruction comes from two sources: a traditional classroom teacher, and at least one of the forms of virtual learning described above.

- Facilitated Virtual Learning: This is computer-based, Internet-based or remote teacher online instruction that is supplemented by a human “facilitator.” This facilitator does not direct the student’s instruction, but rather assists the student’s learning process by providing tutoring or additional supervision. The facilitator may be present with the learner or communicating remotely via the Web or other forms of electronic communication (<https://www.mackinac.org/14475>).



On the other hand, a virtual learning environment (VLE) is a set of teaching and learning tools designed to enhance a student's learning experience by including computers and the Internet in the learning process. The principal components of a VLE package include curriculum mapping (breaking curriculum into sections that can be assigned and assessed), student tracking, online support for both teacher and student, electronic communication (e-mail, threaded discussions, chat, Web publishing), and Internet links to outside curriculum resources. In general, VLE users are assigned either a teacher ID or a student ID. The teacher sees what a student sees, but the teacher has additional user rights to create or modify curriculum content and track student performance. There are a number of commercial VLE software packages available, including Blackboard, WebCT, Lotus LearningSpace, and COSE. (<http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/virtual-learning-environment-VLE-or-managed-learning-environment-MLE>) In addition to these software packages, virtual classrooms may also be the unique examples of VLEs. A virtual classroom is an online learning environment that can be web-based and accessed through a portal or software-based and require a downloadable executable file. Just like in a real classroom, a student in a virtual classroom participates in synchronous instruction, which means that the teacher and students are logged into the virtual learning environment at the same time. These classrooms provide teachers, instructors and learners with benefits of virtual learning technologies.

One of the famous examples of these virtual classrooms is Edmodo that constitutes the core issue of this manuscript.

Edmodo

Edmodo was created by Nic Borg and Jeff O'Hara, who realized the need to evolve the school environment to meet the connectedness of the 21st century world. The success of earlier social networking platforms like MySpace and Facebook, showed that students were connected in many ways outside the classroom, but entered a void when they attended school (Gushiken, 2013). Borg and O'Hara believed that a social network geared towards the needs of students could have a profound impact on how students collaborate and learn in their world, rather than the school setting their teachers grew up in (Edmodo, 2012).

Edmodo, now, has more than 18 million users. Teachers and educators use Edmodo to post announcements and assignments for their students; to share and upload files and materials. Students use Edmodo to communicate with their teachers to ask questions about lessons and homework, and collaborate with their classmates on activities, tasks, assignments and project ideas. Advertisements, games, and other distractions are not included in Edmodo. Teachers have noted that Edmodo even strengthened the relationships between students, and led to a stronger classroom community (Mills & Chandra, 2011). Edmodo's success with students in the classroom warranted a closer look at the potential success in other school-related environments.

Edmodo is tightly integrated with Google Apps for Education and Microsoft OneNote & Office. Remembering multiple passwords, or clicking out of Edmodo to access your Google Drive or to collaborate using Google Docs are not required (Edmodo, 2016). It is the safest and easiest way for educators, instructors and teachers to connect and collaborate with students, parents, and each other.

Method

Participants

In order to check the usability and merits of Edmodo, twelve female and seven male students, aged from 20 to 22, were voluntarily selected from two different courses. Of these students, 15 of them were Grade 3 students who were attending Teaching English to Young Learners and the remaining four were Grade 4 students at New Trends in ELT course.

Data Collection

To convey and to obtain information about students' comments and ideas about Edmodo, a qualitative method of inquiry was conducted for this research. For data collection, participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview and interviewed in English by the author. Each interview took approximately 5-7 minutes. The following questions were asked to the students:

- (1) Can Edmodo be an alternative learning class for your courses?
- (2) Did Edmodo really help you improve your courses?

Their answers were recorded by taking notes because it was thought that audio and video recording could have some constraints for them. Taking notes allows the interviewer to highlight the key points to probe further. Students did not have classes in the interview day. They were all asked to meet at a meeting hall of the faculty at 1:00 p.m. They were all volunteer students and they were not forced to take part in this study. They were clearly informed by the author orally that their participation and interactions will be monitored and analyzed only for this research and their answers will not be shared by anyone else.

Data Analysis

- (1) Once all the interviews were completed, the answers were reviewed by the authors in order to determine common, recurrent, or important comments or ideas. Three colleagues from the ELT department were also asked to recheck and review the answers to bring a fresh perspective or discussion as to the interpretation of the answers. No significant similarities found about common or recurrent ideas of the participants.
- (2) In the second step, answers of the students were categorized according to their answers to the research questions. For example, whether they had stated positive or negative ideas or comments.
- (3) Thirdly, their answers were compared in terms of their genders to understand whether the gender of the participants influenced their answers.

Findings and DiscussionConclusions

Basically, the aim of this paper is to focus on the investigation of the effect of lifelong learning process via VLE environment, namely virtual classroom, Edmodo. Therefore, in the light of this aim, fourteen volunteered ELT students who were majoring at ELT Department



at 19 Mayis University were interviewed, their answers were analyzed and categorized as follow. In the first category, the answers of the students for the first research question were tabulated based upon their positive or negative response. Table 1 depicts the distribution of the participants in terms of their response to the research questions.

Table 1

	Number of the female students with positive answers	Number of the female students with negative answers	Number of the male students with positive answers	Number of the male students with negative answers
Research question 1	4	4	2	1
Research question 2	3	1	3	1
Total				19

Some selected answers of the participants were categorized based upon their preferences to the research questions.

A. Positive Responds of the Participants for the First Research Question:

1. Yes, it helped my progress but I think that rather than being an alternative learning classroom, it may be used for practice (S5,F)
2. My teacher likes using technology, so he wants us to use the opportunities of digital learning platforms. As a student who likes technology, I admire his sharing documents with us. I can say that Edmodo is a real alternative learning class for me (S6, M).
3. I really think that Edmodo can be an alternative learning classroom atmosphere for me because it looks like Facebook and I learn lots of things from Facebook (S3, F).
4. I always need extra materials for my courses, that is why Edmodo helped my improvement (S11, F).
5. There should always be different alternatives for students' learning. Therefore, language learning should not be limited to class hours, there must be alternative options (S17, F).
6. If it is used efficiently, of course, Edmodo will be an alternative learning classroom (S16, M).

B. Positive Responds of the Participants for the Second Research Question:

1. I think that it really helps my progress in my course because sometimes I won't be able to attend the courses regularly. But Edmodo helps me. I can find every materials and course notes on Edmodo uploaded by my teacher (S1, M).
2. Teaching English to Young Learners course, in my opinion, requires additional support rather than our course handouts. Therefore, I certainly believe that the posts and quizzes shared by my teacher via Edmodo were very useful for my grades and improvement (S9,F)
3. Yes, it really helped me improve my course because my teacher always uploads and shares new documents for us. It should also be used by other teachers for other courses (S4, M).

4. Certainly! Edmodo improved my course. I take this course (Teaching Language Skills) for the second time, but this time I think that I will be successful thanks to Edmodo (S13, F).

5. Sharing is good! And my teacher does this best! Sharing new and extra course handouts and worksheets really helped my improvement in my course (S14, F).

6. Whatever is required for students' success must be evaluated and taken into consideration, so I can say that Edmodo improved my success (S18, M).

C. Negative Responds of the Participants for the First Research Question:

1. I am not using a smart phone or tablet, for that reason I have to need a desktop PC to connect Edmodo. This always may not be possible for me, that's why I didn't find it as an alternative learning classroom (S12, F).

2. For me, language learning should be face-to-face, so the only effective classroom is our classroom, not a virtual one (S19, F).

3. I am not good at using internet and electronic devices, so I don't think that Edmodo will help my progress as an alternative class (S8, M).

4. I generally do not like using internet based materials and I did not get accustomed to use internet for learning, That is why I could not say that whether Edmodo was useful or not (S10, F).

5. In order to say that a classroom is an alternative one, there must a real teacher (S15, F).

D. Negative Responds of the Participants for the Second Research Question:

1. I best learn when I listen to my teacher in the real classroom atmosphere. Face-to-face interaction is important for me. Therefore, I think that Edmodo didn't do anything for my improvement (S7, F).

2. At the beginning I thought that Edmodo would be beneficial for me, but later I couldn't use it effectively because of some personal problems (S2, M)

Depending upon the above mentioned responds of the participants, the following findings can be tabulated:

1. Students generally think that Edmodo is a beneficial digital classroom.
2. Students prefer extra materials about courses shared by teachers. Edmodo helps this sharing since it offers a free and quick access.

3. Edmodo is a useful classroom for those who miss the regular courses for some reasons.

4. For some students, face-to-face interaction is much better than virtual learning environments.

5. Edmodo is good for students who like digital networking websites and technology.

6. Students prefer technological teachers.

7. Online posts, documents, quizzes, etc. are required for students.

8. Edmodo's Facebook like interface makes students feel comfort for using it.

9. Edmodo can be used by other educators at their courses as well.

10. Students should be provided with alternative learning opportunities.

11. Students who do not use smart phones or mobile devices do not prefer digital platforms for learning.

12. Real teachers are always beneficial for language teaching and learning.



13. Depending upon electronic devices for those who do not like to use may be frustrating and distracting.

According to the second analysis criteria, answers of the students were examined by the authors whether their genders influenced their answers. The following tables depict the demographic distribution and gender-based categorization of their answers for the research questions:

Table 2. Categorization of gender distribution of participants

Demographic distribution of the participants	
Female	S3, S5, S7, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15, S17, S19
Male	S1, S2, S4, S6, S8, S16, S18

Table 3. Gender-based categorization of the participants

	female students with positive answers	female students with negative answers	male students with positive answers	male students with negative answers
Research question 1	S5, S11, S13, S17,	S10, S12, S15, S19	S6, S16	S8
Research question 2	S3, S9, S14	S7	S1, S4, S18	S2
Total				19

Since most of the participants were female students, the answers of the participants did not give the authors a clear idea about whether their answers were gender-biased or not. However, depending upon some responds of the participants, it can be said that participants did not take into consideration their genders while answering the questions. Most of the students stated positive responses about Edmodo. When we took into consideration these responses of the participants given above, we concluded the following results:

1. Students generally take into consideration their achievements. These achievements do not change from student to student (S1, S3, and S5).
2. Most of the students need extra materials in addition to their course books or course handouts and this need is not related to their genders. (S9)
3. A plenty number of students likes internet and using PCs or mobile devices. There is no significant difference in terms of using these devices according to their genders (S5, S6).
4. Students generally prefer new and real-life materials (S5, S6).
5. Students' success should be evaluated via varied alternative methods (S17, S18).
6. Whatever efficient is for learning should be evaluated (S16).

Conclusion

Virtual learning environments and virtual classroom have also taken the interest of the educators because of being flexible and user friendly (Aküzüm, Baysal, Özmenve Sünkür, 2011), encouraging collaborative learning (Gülbahar, Kalelioğlu ve Madran, 2010), making learning process easier for learners (Togay, Akdur, Yetişkin ve Bilici, 2013) and

carrying out learning outside the walls of the classrooms (Kılıçkaya, 2012). Teachers may get lots of benefits from Edmodo. For example, they may share every kind of materials and documents for their students. They may assign students to hand in their projects, tasks, homework, etc. on Edmodo.

For this study, 19 ELT Department students from two different courses were interviewed. When the responses of the participants were analyzed and reported, it was certified that a great number of students stated the merits of Edmodo for their improvement. Its Facebook like interface, technology-based usage, easiness to access, facility to share and upload documents, materials, providing additional support, etc. were among the positive reactions of the students. Negative reactions towards Edmodo were also stated by the participants such as having preferred real classroom settings rather than virtual ones; not having liked internet or technology-based materials; not having efficient technology or internet use, etc.

In addition, this study also handled the responses of the participants in terms of their gender differences. It was reported that participants' genders did not influence their perceptions about Edmodo. Essentially, the great number of the participants was female students. When the responses of the participants were clearly analyzed, it would be understood that expectations of the participants for their educational improvement always came before their gender differences. The findings of this study are also in line with what Holland and Muilenburg (2011), Balasubramanian, Jaykumar and Fukey (2014) and Gushiken (2013) reported in the literature.

It can be concluded that Edmodo provides unlimited merits to the students. For instance, they may practice and revise what they have learned even if they may have missed the courses. Shy and introvert learners may use Edmodo without fear of participation. Finally, Edmodo is a very useful virtual learning environment providing lots of opportunities for students.

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