



The Research on Blended Learning of ESL Based on Moodle Platform

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Abstract

The thesis puts forward a blending way of learning ESL based on platform. Blended learning integrates the ESL courses with the educational technologies and combines the advantages of regular class learning and online learning. The author designs a mode of ESL learning on Moodle platform and suggests some activities of ESL blended learning.

Key words: Blended learning; ESL learner; Moodle Platform

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INTRODUCTION

Methods of teaching and means of learning have undergone profound changes due to the development of information technology, especially the advancement of computer network technology. The access to information, together with the dissemination and application of information, has caused tremendous and various changes. Learners can have access to computers and internet to obtain knowledge without the limitation of time and space, which make them have more autonomy and flexibility to choose the content and ways of learning.

In this case, the traditional teacher-centered means of teaching is facing new challenges. Meanwhile, the richness and sharing of online resources endow both the learners and their teachers with equivalent rights to obtain knowledge and conduct online communication, which can give full play to the initiative of the students involved in the teaching process, help to stimulate students' innovative consciousness and conduce to the formation of a new teacher-student relationship of equality and mutual assistance. The blending thoughts and ways of teaching and learning can combine the advantages of the traditional models of teaching and the ways of information technology assisted teaching, and achieve the integration of courses and educational technology.

1. THE BLENDED LEARNING AND THE MOODLE PLATFORM

1.1 What Is Blended Learning?

A blended learning is an integration of online learning and regular class learning. Until now, there's no consensus on how it is defined and different terms, such as "blended", "mixed-mode" and "hybrid", are used. Some researchers define the blended learning as follows:

Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004) say "Blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment, rather than a ratio of delivery modalities. In other words, blended learning should be approached not merely as a temporal construct, but rather as a fundamental redesign of the instructional model with the following characteristics:

- A shift from lecture- to student-centered instruction in which students become active and interactive learners (this shift should apply to the entire course, including face-to-face contact sessions);

- Increases in interaction between student-instructor, student-student, student-content, and student-outside resources;

- Integrated formative and summative assessment mechanisms for students and instructor.

Kekang He (2004) thinks that the blended learning is a combination of the advantages of traditional way of learning and E-learning, which makes the instructors play the role of instruction, enlightenment and monitoring and fully embody students' initiatives, enthusiasm and creativity as the main stream of the learning process. He's idea stresses the roles of instructors and students in the course of learning and teaching. Jiahou Li (2007) defines blended learning as optimization selection and combination of all the teaching elements which aim to achieve the teaching aims. Li thinks the blended learning is supposed to require the instructors and students to apply various teaching methods, modes, strategies, media and technologies skillfully to the course of teaching and learning, resulting in an artistic realm.

The blended learning is an optimization combination which aims to include the positive aspects of face-to-face learning and online learning. Students can have real experience of interaction on regular classes, while the online courses can supply the learners abundant resources, which can offer learners more flexibility and convenience to study.

1.2 The Moodle Platform

Moodle is the abbreviations of Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, a free and open-source e-learning software developed by Martin Dougiamas in 2004. The software is also known as a Course Management System (CMS), a Learning Management System (LMS), or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The system is based on the concepts of social constructivism which tries to offer both educators and students a platform for online interaction and collaboration. Moodle, developed specifically for teaching, can provide a variety of different teaching activities for students, allow students to take full advantage of modern network technology to exchange ideas and obtain learning experience, and build personal knowledge system. With Moodle, kinds of teaching activities can be integrated effectively and students can take advantage of functions of Moodle, such as chat rooms, forums, interactive evaluation, Webquest and Wiki, to conduct collaborative learning, which can convert the traditional closed learning environment into an open interactive network learning platform, the traditional spoon-fed learning into independent and personalized inquiry-based learning. The changes above are in compliance with the learning characteristics of the tide, so they can flexibly establish a highly efficient way to learn and greatly increase students' interest in learning ESL.

Moodle is not designed specifically for language teaching, but it is open-source and offers many learning tools which can be used in ESL learning. Functions of Moodle include the integration of a variety of assignments with kinds of activities, the access to abundant multimedia resources, electronic delivery of teaching materials (such as documents, presentations, audio and video and audio files), synchronous and asynchronous teacher-student and student-student communication (for example, chats and forums), and testing and assessment of students' work. (Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal, 2004)

2. DESIGN OF BLENDED LEARNING OF ESL BASED ON MOODLE PLATFORM

The blended learning is a combination of learning theories, a blending of various learning resources and environment, and a mixture of learning approaches. It is the enhancement of the notion of leaning, which also calls for the change of students' cognitive style, as well as the change of instructors' strategies and roles of teaching. Coincident with the changes in the field of ESL learning, ESL teachers should guide students to integrate the online learning with the class learning to conduct blended learning, which can provide the ESL learning a better learning environment, and encourage ESL learners to conduct self-regulated learning, collaborative learning. Huan Wang & Bingbing Chen (2010) put forward a blended learning mode of College English based on Moodle. With the reference of Wang and Chen' mode, the author designs the ESL learning mode as follows: Figure 1

Four essential parts of blended learning are course introduction, organization of teaching activities, learning support and evaluation of learning. A blended class is composed of a series of steps as are shown in the following.

2.1 Preview

In this phase, ESL learners can login the Moodle platform and preview the learning materials: glossary, background, the text, listening materials, discussion topics, etc. This belongs to the introduction part of the class, which is essential and helps ESL learners to have a global understanding of the materials to be learned. ESL teachers can upload relative documents to the platform ahead of time for the learners to refer to.

2.2 Class Activities

Language is tool for communication. No matter how powerful and effective online learning is, the traditional face-to-face language teaching is never out of date. Only in a real-time surrounding, can ESL learners sense the charm of language and learn the natural way to speak. Text books are important media in the classroom teaching. Reading and speaking activities in the class can be designed to help learners develop their language skills.

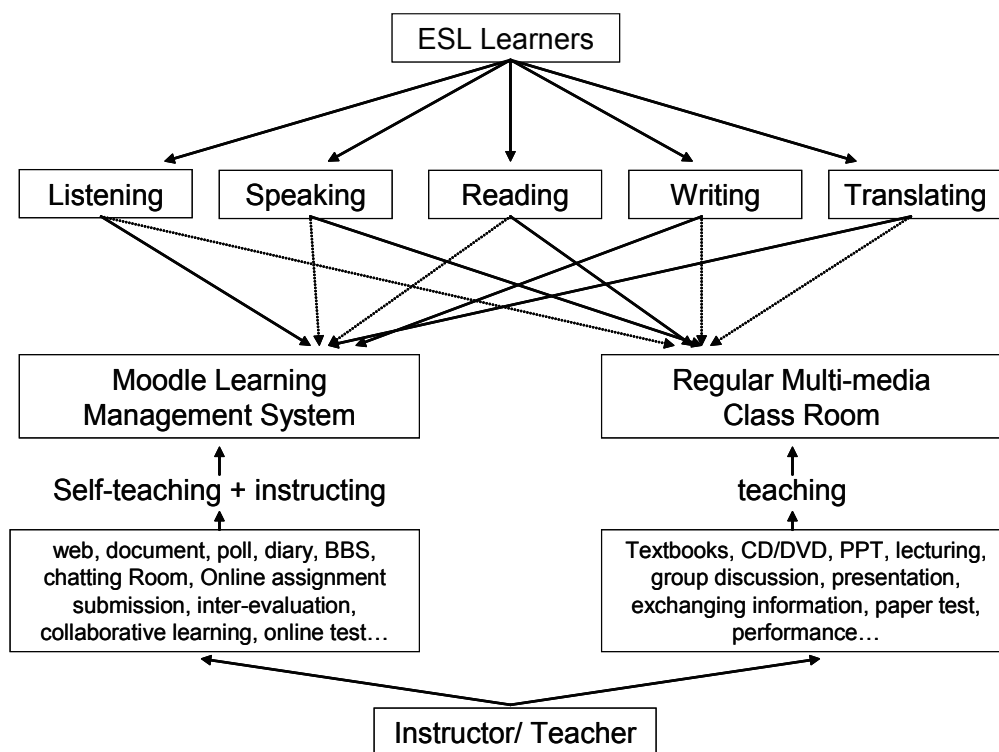


Figure 1
Teaching Design of the Blended Learning of ESL on Moodle Platform
 Note: Arrows in the diagram above refer to different parts of learning activities.

2.3 Online Learning

Online learning ESL courses can be an important way to supplement the class learning as well as a more effective way to enrich the courses than the regular class activities. ESL learners can make use of the web links to search more knowledge relative with the ESL courses. Both audio and video material can be accessed online easily. They can login the chatting room of the platform and conduct group learning. Forum of the Moodle platform is a good place for the ESL learners to exchange learning materials and experience. Online learning makes it possible for ESL learners with different levels have access to what they want and need. They can have their own pace of learning and seek for diversity of ELS knowledge to learn. The online learning is more individual-centered compared with the classroom learning.

2.4 Class Learning and Feedbacks

After the class teaching and online learning, ESL teachers should organize students in class and instruct student to deal with the problems they encounter in the previous stage. This is a vital step for solving learning problems and sharing achievements. Students can also demonstrate their achievement to the teachers and classmates.

2.5 Assignments and Evaluation

This is the last step of a learning circle. Assignment online and homework offline are necessary ways for the ESL learners to consolidate their achievement. Online learning offers the teachers a more objective way to

evaluate the learners than the traditional ways which focus more on the results of achievements, because online evaluation can let the teacher notice the process of students learning the language.

3. DESIGN OF ESL LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN BLENDED LEARNING

3.1 Listening Activities

Listening in the regular classrooms is always too much limited concerning the presentation of the listening materials, while the Moodle platform is a good alternative to offer an ocean of listening materials. Moodle has plenty of modules for language learning. Chatting room, a module of Moodle, can be imbedded and works as a platform for conducting listening and speaking. Such video websites as Youtube, VOA, and CNN can be linked to Moodle which can definitely provide ESL learners sufficient alternatives to get access to aural English materials. Moodle has a function of management that can record learners' learning time, which can help ESL teachers to monitor and supervise students' devotion to learning. Moodle itself owns some tools that allow the audio files of different formats to be uploaded for students to use. Apparently, Moodle expands the range of alternatives for ESL learners when they try to improve their listening. During the course of learning ESL, online learning is more preferred to the listening exercise in the classroom.

3.2 Speaking Activities

As is mentioned above, the real experience of speaking a foreign language calls for a real time communication. In blended learning of ESL, the speaking practice can be conducted in a regular classroom. The face-to-face communication can help learners understand others more easily. Before that, the teacher can upload documents of relative background information, topic questions, chunks that are frequently used about the topic to the Moodle platform, which can help to arm the learners with more knowledge to use during talking. For those learners who are always too shy to open their mouth, the online chatting is another good choice. COVELL, a free and powerful module developed by EU to study foreign languages, can be imbedded in Moodle and works as a speaking platform for students to chat in English with their classmates or native English speakers all over the world. It can also be used between the instructors and ESL learners to talk to deal with the problems learners might come across.

3.3 Reading Activities

In the blended learning of ESL courses, the intensive reading is advised to be conducted in the regular classrooms, since the learners can better understand the reading materials and the teachers can also offer instant instructions to them. For the extensive reading, Moodle provides diverse and rich materials for learners to choose. Thomos Robb, a staff of Kyoto Sangyo University, made a plug-in named EXTENSIVE READER, which allows language teachers and learners to share an ocean of reading materials. ESL teachers can upload the leveled reading materials developed by OXFORD or CAMBRIDGE to the Moodle platform for learners to read. The plug-in also has an exercise bank of reading, which can be used by the teachers and learners to evaluate the level of reading. The blended reading practice can take advantage of the two ways of learning and help learners to booster their reading skills.

3.4 Writing Activities

While the exercise of writing in class can be conducted in the classroom, Moodle offers another way to help learning ESL. Moodle is designed with some functions apt for writing practice. The functions of forum, workshop, and wiki offer enough space for ESL learners to practice writing. Forum is a good place for students to have a brainstorming of topics, contents and structures before starting writing. The function of workshop allows both the instructors and students to read others' writings and evaluate them. This way of evaluation not only allows students to find out the problems in their own writing, but offer them chances to learn from others. The most prominent aspect of the course is to guide ESL learners to focus more on the process of writing rather than the result of writing. Online learning itself requires lots of input

when ESL learners answer questions or exchange ideas, which in turn can also attribute to the improvement of their writing competency.

3.5 Translating Activities

In blended learning of ESL, the online practice of translation has its unique advantage when the learners can do translation exercise with the help of online dictionary. ESL teachers can also start a passage of text and post it in the forum or workshop section of Moodle and requires students to have translation contests. Subsequently, the teacher can choose some of the translation version and guide students to evaluate and appreciate their translation work. With the different versions of translation from the same source text, students can compare and evaluate their peer's work and find out ways to improve their translation skills. ESL teachers can also upload video clips of native English speakers and then guide students to do simultaneous interpretation online and record their interpretation online with the tools on Moodle. In the wake of that, students can call out the recorded interpretation and analyze and evaluate their own work. This makes the simultaneous interpretation real and practical, which of course can stimulate students to improve their interest on doing interpretation exercise.

4. ADVANTAGES OF BLENDED LEARNING ESL ON MOODLE PLATFORM

4.1 Exploiting the Advantages of ClassTeaching and Online Learning.

Traditional ESL learning in class is more lecture-centered and students can have good communication with their partners in class, while the online learning lays more emphasis on the individual development and is more individual-centered. The blended learning integrates both of the advantages of the two ways and focus on the enhancement of learners' overall competency. It emphasizes both the aim and the process of learning ESL, which makes it more objective to evaluate learners' progress. The blended learning changes the rigid procedure of teaching second language and makes it flexible for learners to learn ESL.

4.2 Cultivating Learners' Abilities of Self-teaching

Moodle is a management system of learning which can record the process of learners' activities online and this may supervise students to work harder. The blended learning calls for learners' sufficient preview and review, and they need to do extensive exercise of reading, writhing, listening and translation. It requires learners to finish tests online, make self-evaluation, have group discussion and write feedbacks. Their abilities of independent learning could be well developed in the course.

4.3 Enriching the Contents and Ways of Teaching ESL

The Moodle platform can include diverse forms of language learning materials. The pictures, audio and video files can make learners feel like being in authentic foreign language surroundings, which can booster their interest in learning ESL. Moodle also offers more space and ways for ESL learners and their teachers to communicate, which helps learners better catch their teachers' intension and facilitate teachers to obtain learners feedback of teaching.

CONCLUSION

The development of modern educational technologies makes it feasible to conduct blended learning, which responds to the diversification of ESL teaching resources. Online environment is suitable for ESL learners' self-teaching, but with some limitations. Meanwhile, majority of learners call for teachers' face-to-face instructions. The blended learning is combination of online learning and offline learning, a mixture of individual-centeredness and group learning, a blending of traditional textbooks and multimedia, which can exploit teachers' roles of organizing, cooperating, instructing and the learners' roles of self-controlling, motivation. Inevitably, a lot of difficulties still remain to be settled when blended learning is practiced. It requires more commitment of learners, more devotion and knowledge of teachers and more integration of traditional courses and modern technologies.

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