

Use of LMS (Learning Management Systems) to Promote Composing in EFL contexts: The case of Third Year English Department

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Abstract

Teachers have been given a chance by latest technologies to use a variety of tools to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process. This makes it important for teachers to be acknowledged about the advantages and possibilities of using technology in the classroom in order to help the struggling EFL learners. These new technologies , learning management systems, in the classrooms are a way for teachers to change ways of instructing to meet the ever-changing needs of their students. Utilization of these online systems is a way to empower students to become self-autonomous. In foreign language classrooms, online activity, an important instructional activity in process writing courses is highly recommended as a useful source of feedback. Many scholars argue that educational online systems may encourage collaborative learning, foster learner autonomy and help overcome EFL learners' writing weaknesses.

الملخص

أعطيت للمعلمين فرصة استخدام أحدث التقنيات المتنوعة من الأدوات لتحسين جودة عملية التعليم والتعلم. وهذا يجعل من المهم بالنسبة للمعلمين الاعتراف بمزايا وإمكانيات استخدام التكنولوجيا في الفصل الدراسي من أجل مساعدة المتعلمين المتعثرين في تلقي اللغة الأجنبية. هذه

التقنيات الجديدة ، أنظمة إدارة التعلم ، في الفصول الدراسية هي طريقة للمدرسين لتغيير طرق التدريس لتلبية الاحتياجات المتغيرة لطلابهم . يعد استخدام هذه الأنظمة عبر الإنترنت وسيلة لتمكين الطلاب من أن يصبحوا مستقلين ذاتياً . في الفصول الدراسية للغات الأجنبية . أكد العديد من الباحثين بأن الأنظمة التعليمية عبر الإنترنت قد تشجع التعلم التعاوني ، وتعزز استقلالية المتعلم ، والمساعدة في التغلب على نقاط ضعف الكتابة لدى المتعلمين في ميدان اللغات الأجنبية.

The teaching of English as a foreign language in secondary education in Algeria as defined in the official orientations by the policy makers is to equip our learners with required knowledge and skills so as to enable them to access documentation written in English and to use the target language for communicative purposes. Subsequently, the educational authorities have designed new English textbooks that comply with the new syllabuses laid out by the National Curriculum Committee of the Ministry of National Education in March 2006. However, throughout our visits to different schools to attend seminars and training days and relying on our personal experience in the field of language teaching for observation, we noticed that in the application of the advocated approach, part of the objectives set to the teaching of foreign languages at this level were not reached. Witness, the unbalanced development of the skills with an overemphasis of the aural/oral skills at the expense of the writing skill mainly. Furthermore, the fact that the Baccalaureate (entrance exam to university) is exclusively of the written mode, it is not much to say that the teaching-testing congruency principle may be seriously questioned. This argument is evidenced through examinees' written performances at the baccalaureate exam.

A word of warning is necessary here. Our chief concern is not to diagnose the teaching learning situation at high school and propose solutions. Rather, our main aim is to experiment a learning management system (LMS) and assess its effectiveness as a sustainable remedial action at the receiving end, mainly third year tertiary education.

The writing skill in second or foreign languages is considered as one way of measuring one's language proficiency, and writing instruction aims mainly at enabling the students to write well. Yet, we know from our classes, as well as from scholars' writing publications, that EFL students do not write as well as we think they should (e.g., Yarrow

and Topping, 2001). The reasons for students' inability to write well enough to meet teachers' expectations are many and varied.

Some teachers blame the students for being lazy, while most students lay it on the extreme complexity of the writing skill. Writing is a demanding task especially for second or foreign language learners. It has been found that most language learners at all levels believe that writing is one of the most difficult language skills to master (Radecki, P. M. and Swales, J. M. 1988). In Arab countries, several authors found weaknesses in second/foreign language writing (Al-Hazmi, S. 2006). It has been realized that students of EFL classes were unable to adopt a professional style of writing because essay writing from first draft to final draft is a stressful task for nonnative learners (Lee, I. 1997). In short, Arab learners of English which include Algerians encounter major problems in writing effectively because of many reasons.

The impetus to the present work comes from personal experience as an EFL teacher at the University of Laghouat. Throughout the years of work in the field, we have detected that EFL students have many deficiencies for writing. These range from lack of skills to the use of incoherent ideas to writing style difficulties. While reviewing training reports from English department students, we noticed students' lack of a host of specific problems. Among them, we can enumerate incorrect punctuation, wrong word order, incorrect use of tenses, wrong use of connectors, lack of organization, incoherent ideas, etc.

Literature Review

Faced with this situation, the researcher has considered a project to stimulate university students to improve their writing skills. The project starts with the basic idea that any support we would develop towards this end should be related to collaborative learning (CL).

Collaborative learning takes place because the group members interact with each other. The interactions include agreed rules, explanations, corrections etc. Teachers are supposed to design well-specified collaborative scenarios. It is necessary therefore, to design the learning task and the learning environment.

A wide variety of collaborative work is frequently used to develop the different skills in the foreign language (FL) classroom. In FL writing, however, peer response (whether verbal or written) is the only form of collaborative work that has been widely adopted and studied since the 1990s (Hyland, 2003). The scenario which is adopted for the present work is peer review within a learning management system since nowadays most teenagers

and adults spend the bulk of their time in front of their PCs. Besides, latest developments in the world have made traditional notions of education outdated and have given way to new, more innovative trends in teaching. These trends have been designed to meet student expectations. Thus more learner-centered approaches were sought in teaching any subject, including languages. These electronic approaches have emerged to facilitate student-centered learning. This has in turn led to face-to-face classroom teaching to be supplemented by technologically driven educational environments, which are more learner-centered, more collaborative and more innovative. Thus, in the present study, the researcher has worked on peer editing, as a form of collaborative remedial work of written composition using a learning management system, in our case Moodle software, to implement enhancement activities that are likely to bring about students' contribution to improve their writing performance.

Teachers have been given a chance by latest technologies to use a variety of tools to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process. This makes it important for teachers to be acknowledged about the advantages and possibilities of using technology in the classroom in order to help the struggling EFL learners (Kamimura, T. 2006).

Moodle, a learning management system (LMS), is a free and open source learning software platform. This e-learning tool allows students to continue learning outside the school environment where the teacher's role is still necessary to facilitate the planning and preparation processes. Moodle is one of the preferred types as a method of learning based on electronic media which is grounded on the use of sound pedagogical principles; this media is designed for helping educators create effective online learning communities.

Moodle helps educators to support traditional classroom pedagogies with numerous techniques (Sullivan and Pratt, 1996). Moodle is acknowledged as self-directed, out of class practice which fosters learner autonomy. As indicated by Lamb (2004), learners generally welcome internet applications as they can learn at their own pace. Moreover, Moodle environment aims to enhance students' experience in learning and is designed with a constructivist pedagogical framework (Moodle Docs, 2006). Transmission of information from teacher to students and from student to student is no longer credited. Above all mentioned factors, the major factor that has a role for Moodle to be preferred as a way of learning is that teachers can easily access this software by the program's web page and design a page for their own course free of charge. Furthermore, students also can access to, for instance, to exchange writing assignments with their peers, review them, comment and give feedback (Tuzi, 2004). In this respect, and in an attempt to improve EFL learners'

writing performance, this research is intended to make use of Moodle platform as a tool for peer review exchange.

The practice of peer editing has been burgeoning in ESL/EFL writing classes for the last decade, given its strong support from social learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Proponents of peer review have made a plethora of claims about its cognitive, affective, social, and linguistic benefits, most of which have been substantiated by extant empirical evidence. Peer review has been found to help both college (Brumfit & Johnson, 1994) and secondary (Peterson, 2003) students obtain more insight into their writing and revision processes, foster a sense of ownership of the text (Tsui & Ng, 2000), generate more positive attitudes toward writing (Min, 2005), enhance audience awareness (Brumfit & Johnson, 1994), and facilitate their second/foreign language acquisition (Min, 2005) conducted a classroom study to train 18 responders in a sophomore EFL writing class. She identified four characteristics of comments reported to facilitate students' revisions in previous research: clarifying writers' intentions, identifying problems, explaining the nature of problems, and making specific suggestions, and used them as guidelines during in-class training.

New technologies in the classrooms are a way for teachers to change ways of instructing to meet the ever-changing needs of their students. Utilization of Moodle platform is a way to empower students to become self-autonomous, on the one hand. In FL classrooms, peer review, an important instructional activity in process writing courses is highly recommended as a useful source of feedback on the other hand. Many scholars argue that the latter may encourage collaborative learning, foster learner autonomy and help overcome EFL learners' writing weaknesses.

Problematic and Research Questions

The difficulties encountered when composing essays and reports in English indicate a need for a strategic methodology that will impact critical thinking and a better writing ability. Research in the field has proved that when teachers train their students on reviewing each other's draft within an e-environment, students' writing performance improves. Central to this present research work is the question: To what extent can Moodle-based peer review instruction help improving students' writing ability? In other words, how can educators secure the teaching ground for students' motivation and implication to the task at hand (in our case, peer review) that would render the learners performance purposeful?

The purpose of this study is to identify the effects of ICT-supported peer review on EFL students' writing performance. In order to conduct an in-depth analysis and make inferences, varied questions were raised:

- a) How can EFL learners be trained to review and evaluate their peers' written production (essays and reports) effectively?
- b) To what extent is Moodle software an enhancement tool conducive to effective peer review?
- c) Does peer review have any effects, whether negative or positive, on EFL learners' writing performance?
- d) Are there any differences on EFL learners' writing attainments between the effects of Moodle-based peer review and those of peer review led in traditional classrooms?

In the attempts to provide answers to the questions above, a set of hypotheses is laid: Firstly, students who are trained on this specific cooperative study skill would be better reviewers in peer review and evaluation of their peers' drafts. Secondly, peer review, with its attending sense of a wider audience and stronger social support, will be preferred over teacher review which engages no audience and generates no social support. Thirdly, when a peer review approach is applied, EFL teaching will be more learner-centered and will positively impact learners' writing performance. Finally, if students were instructed within an online system-based peer review framework, those learners' writing achievement in FL would be better.

Objectives

The objective of this experimental study is to investigate the relationship between Moodle-based peer review instruction and that of students' ability to write well, and its implication on their academic writing performance. That is, the researcher attempts to highlight the need for a future research on the effects of ICT-supported writing instruction on EFL students' writing ability. In this respect, the research at hand aims first at examining whether EFL students are trained at and can effectively use peer review during their academic tasks. It aims also at measuring the effects of peer review on students' writing performance when applied within information and communications technologies environments.

The research findings could serve teachers and course designers in conceiving an effective EFL writing course. It could be considered as a first step in the design of a course for EFL students that helps promote writing skills self-development through self-awareness raising and cooperative work.

Methodology

This research has an experimental nature that comprises two independent variables (peer review and Moodle platform) and one dependent variable (EFL learners' writing performance). It involves comparing two groups on one outcome measure to test the above mentioned hypotheses regarding causation. Being interested in the effects of technology-based peer review on EFL students' writing performance, the researcher will randomly divide the population of the study into two groups. One of the groups, the control group, will receive writing instruction within the traditional method (teacher as central element of the learning teaching operation, and review of students' production being done by the teacher).

The second group, the experimental group will receive peer review instruction being done via computers, i.e., writing assignments should be exchanged on due time using Moodle platform, and then students are instructed to revise and evaluate their peers' drafts using checklists). After receiving the instructions, both groups will be compared to see whether students' writing performance in the experimental group improved better than among students in the control group.

The study reported in this dissertation is intended to investigate the effects of Moodle-based peer review in EFL writing class in an urban university in southern Algeria, Laghouat. Participants are sixty-nine third LMD year students at the English department. Their average age is twenty. All are native speakers of Arabic and are supposed to graduate by the end of the academic year 2015/2016 after having submitted their training reports on the training period they are to go through in the different middle schools in Laghouat.

The peer review training will take place during writing sessions and will consist of three phases: In-class modeling: during this phase, each participant of the experimental group will have the opportunity to receive about 6 hours of in-class training on how to review and evaluate a peer's draft, using the checklists they will be provided with. The modeling can be demonstrated when students are about to perform paired peer review on their drafts of the essays and reports. The instructor first distributes to the students the checklists and a copy of an essay composed by any of the students. Then, she/he uses the think aloud method to demonstrate how to make comments by using a four-step

procedure: Clarifying writers' intentions, identifying the source of problems, explaining the nature of problems, and making specific suggestions (Min, 2005). In-class training: during this phase, each member of the experimental group is to be offered a training on the use of Moodle platform (how to access, how to submit assignments, how to view assignments submitted by other peers, how to review and evaluate assignments online and how to submit comments.

Data collection started at the beginning of the 2015-2016 academic year. Students first underwent a detailed writing pretest whose tasks focus on punctuation and capitalization, word order, use of tenses, subject verb agreement, use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, use of prepositions, coherence, cohesion, word choice, organization, stated thesis statement and topic sentence, supporting ideas and concluding sentences.

Students then continued attending writing classes that focused on essay elaboration. After eight weeks, peer reviewing was introduced. Each session, one of the students' drafts are copied and given to their peers to be reviewed. The goal was to review at least five drafts in the class. The students then were to take their reviewed essays home and make any appropriate corrections needed and turn in the final copy the following day. On the peer review day, the student writers are also allowed to comment on the reviews they received from their peers.

Later, using peer review approach, students of the experimental group were given access to the Moodle platform with anonymous accounts. They were asked to anonymously write the assigned essays. The latter would be submitted to the group members through Moodle platform. Receivers would also anonymously review and evaluate the producers' writing works according to the checklists provided by their instructor. These reviewed drafts would anonymously be returned to their writers with the readers' comments. These comments were expected to be taken into account during the second draft. This period would end in a detailed writing post-test that focuses on the above mentioned criteria to see whether students' writing had improved.

As stated before, the work has an experimental nature in which a variety of research tools was used in gathering data. These consist of review of literature, EFL writing pre-test, Peer review training/instruction and EFL writing post-test. The collected data will be treated and analyzed using SPSS software.

In sum, this work remains as an attempt from the part of the researcher to shed light on the difficulties encountered by Algerian learners in the field of EFL writing and on the

efficacy of the technology-supported peer review approach in improving these learners' writing ability. In order to orient the reader to the concepts which are investigated in the present study, a brief discussion of these concepts is made.

In short, the present study focuses on Moodle-based peer review that has been used with students and has been found to be effective and engaging. What is offered in this work expands the notion of what counts as effective writing instruction. The latter can be much more than simply asking students to write paragraphs at the end of a lesson. Process writing instruction can and should be effective, but it should also be engaging and creative, and tap into the various talents and gifts of all students.

This research has an experimental nature in which a variety of research materials has been used. These materials consist of a review of literature, a survey that measures students' awareness and use of writing strategies as well as their motivation to write in English, two writing performance tests and an interview. To find answers to the research questions and identify the effects of Moodle-based peer review instruction on students' performance and motivation to write, the population of this study comprises 69 third year English department students. Having gathered the data through questionnaires, SPSS (Statistical Practice Social Sciences), a computer program used for statistical analysis, is used to measure data. It is software used by researchers of social domains, mainly in descriptive and analytical methods to manage data and analyze statistics. To do so, T-tests are applied for analyzing and interpreting the data.

Findings and Conclusions

This section includes the conclusions to the study. It comprises the following points: recommendations for future research and conclusions. The interpretation of the results is also included in this chapter. As stated earlier, results of study showed that students' ability to write new better quality essays has improved. The question worth to be asked is whether this improvement is the result of training them in editing essays and having them receive peer feedback in an online environment?

In fact students' responses to the interview questions revealed that students enjoyed the experience, showed interest in it and seemed very satisfied because of the many benefits gained and reflected in their performances. The intervention (online peer review practice) the researcher used helped bring about a change in students' attitudes towards peer-editing as well as improve some students' peer-editing skills and even writing skills.

Interview questions results revealed that the students who engaged in peer-editing revised not only their essays but also their grammar notes better than those who only received feedback from their teacher. Moreover, the interviewees' responses showed that peer-editing allows the students to experience what it feels like working in groups; thing, according to them, that helps collaborate and share knowledge better than those who have not received peer feedback. These results seem to vouch for the usefulness of peer-editing as a technique in developing good writing skills and creating a motivating atmosphere among peers.

As stated above, the purpose of the study was to determine whether or not putting into practice peer editing within a technology (Moodle)-supported environment would be more effective for EFL writers in the English language department at Ammar Telidji University than practicing editing in a face-to-face teacher-led classroom. Thus, Central to this present research work is the main question: To what extent can Moodle-based peer review instruction help improving students' writing ability? In other words, how can educators secure the teaching ground for students' motivation and implication to the task at hand (in our case, peer review) that would render the learners' performance purposeful? Four sub-questions were used to answer the main research questions, as follows: How can EFL learners be trained to review and evaluate their peers' written production (essays and reports) effectively? To what extent is Moodle software an enhancement tool conducive to effective peer review? Does peer review have any effects, whether negative or positive, on EFL learners' writing performance? Are there any differences on EFL learners' writing attainments between the effects of Moodle-based peer review and those of peer review led in traditional classrooms? These sub-questions were answered through the following questions: Is there a difference between the experimental CL group and the control TL group at pre-test? Does the experimental CL group change from pre-test to post-test? Does the control TL group change from pre-test to post-test? Is the experimental peer training group different from the control teacher-led group at post-test? The study results were obtained from the students' scores for their written essays (pre and post-tests), the experiment (online peer editing practice), and from their responses in questionnaires and interviews.

Various hypotheses were developed to answer the sub-research questions. 'How can EFL learners be trained to review and evaluate their peers' written production (essays and reports) effectively? "Does peer review have any effects, whether negative or positive, on EFL learners' writing performance?"

In line with previous studies (Berg 1999; Ferris and Hedgcock 1992) which confirmed that by training students to be good peer feedback providers, the results would be greater provided that students in the preset study be exposed to a fairly lengthy coaching procedure. This would consist of role playing and participating in peer evaluation sessions, discovering the effective strategies, and studying the genre of student writing. In order to analyze the effectiveness of the training sessions, peer review sessions and student writings were analyzed. It should be noted that students of the experimental peer review training group had the chance to practice the new experiment in the language laboratories where internet connexion is available. They wrote essays on specific topics in the first week of the study and uploaded their production using Moodle platform. Teacher provided students with coaching and guidance during all sessions. The findings presented in the previous chapter revealed differences between both groups, the experimental peer review training group and the control group concerning hypothesis 1("students who are trained on this specific cooperative study skill would be better reviewers in peer review and evaluation of their peers' drafts.") and hypothesis 3(when a peer review approach is applied, EFL teaching will be more learner-centered and will positively impact learners' writing performance.) were highly significant; thus hypotheses 1 and 3 were confirmed. The participants in the experimental group who were trained on this collaborative online peer review practice performed better as peer-editors and evaluators of their peers' drafts.

"To what extent is Moodle software an enhancement tool conducive to effective peer review?" "Are there any differences on EFL learners' writing achievements between the effects of Moodle-based peer review and those of peer review led in traditional classrooms?"

A comparison between the pre- and post-test essays of students in the experimental online peer review group in terms of the mean difference found that the involvement in evaluation and review of peers' drafts within the Moodle platform had positive effects on collaboration and the development of writing skills. The findings suggest that there was some improvement in the editing stage of writing (checking mechanics and revising) after involvement in the new experience. Moreover, It could thus be suggested that students needed a motivating atmosphere which was guaranteed by the electronic-based environment. This result showed that the experience benefited the students a great deal in terms of motivation. These findings are similar to earlier studies that have investigated the impact of the practice of peer review using technology on improving students' writing skills, such as that of Kaminski (2005). In line with this, an analysis of the students' essays indicated that the Moodle-based peer review strategy had helped the students to improve

their writing skills effectively. Besides, during the interviews, the students in the experimental group expressed their joy, interest and high motivation to the new practices; thus hypothesis 2 (“peer review, with its attending sense of a wider audience and stronger social support, will be preferred over teacher review, which engages no audience and generates no social support.” and hypothesis 4 (if students were instructed within a Moodle-based peer review framework, those learners’ writing achievement in FL would be better.) were confirmed.

In summary, with regard to the findings for the research questions, the present study has provided additional insights to those of other studies that have investigated the effectiveness of Moodle-based peer review in enhancing and improving students’ writing skills.

The findings of the humble research work reveal that peer-review when exercised within a technology-supported environment may have positive effects on EFL learners’ writing skills. This quality in writing, based on the findings, may result from teacher-led feedback practice in physical classrooms but at lesser rates. However, teachers’ skills may well be a decisive factor in how successful peer-editing is. Thus, to help students engage seriously and successfully in peer review, teachers are recommended to observe the following guidelines when introducing peer-editing in their classrooms.

To start with, before expecting students to accept the idea of peer-editing as a revision technique, perhaps ESL teachers need to expose their students to the new experience and explain the advantages that peer revision could hold for them. Raising student awareness about the importance of the strategy and its benefits could help reduce their anxiety towards a technique they may not know much about. Teachers may need to encourage students revise their peers’ drafts to see how it helps them engage and practice a variety of skills (critical reading and writing, gaining more knowledge, sharing views, revising previous knowledge, experiencing less anxiety...). All this can be achieved through the use, for example, of video recordings. Teachers can show their students a video where students are practicing peer editing (input & output) with focus on process. These sessions have to be followed by class reflection and discussion of procedures and strategies employed.

Recommendations

Moodle platform proved to be very effective not only in languages teaching but also in teaching all subjects. It has a variety of features that make it easy to be adopted by teachers and students and adapted to whatever learning and teaching situation. However it

proved to be new to students. For this reason, teachers need to ensure enough training to make their students familiar with the new platform.

Students need to receive training in giving proper feedback. Stanley (1992) points out that students cannot be expected to give effective comments on their peers' papers if they have not been well-trained in that art. Thus, teachers are recommended to allot a few class periods to teach students how to provide constructive feedback. With the current movement towards learner-centered instruction, the way is paved for the teacher to target learner autonomy.

It is also recommended that teachers grade students' peer-editing forms, giving extra grades to student editors who give clear and content-specific feedback. No matter how proficient students are, without motivation to do their task, they may not engage wholeheartedly in it. Considering the above factors when incorporating peer-editing in the writing classroom could promote harmonious and positive interaction among group members and increase their chances of constructing new knowledge, thus paving their way to independent learning.

It is worthwhile to consider carrying out more extensive research that includes other possible factors likely to affect the final results of the present study. Such a study could be executed in environments different from the one it was carried out in. It is also possible to have a wider range of students involved in the project, students of different ages, levels and backgrounds. In geographical terms, participants can be drawn from different contexts to help generalize the findings of the research. In other words, the fact that most participants were students who lived in the campus and had no internet facilities may have affected the final results at least the access frequency.

It could be equally important to make use of other different research tools such as classroom observation which enables to deeply observe and investigate how students interact and perform during peer feedback sessions. As far as assessment procedures are concerned, the researcher wishes that future studies would use the Moodle platform not only for peer review practice but also as an electronic means of writing assessment.

Conclusion

To end with, a professor and dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology took a leave to start a radical, new nonprofit university that she says will have no majors, no lectures, and no classrooms. The basic idea is to start a university from scratch for today's needs and with today's technology. Then it's high time we thought of an educational

revolution that aims at modernizing the system by adopting new innovations and adapting them to our context.

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