

Illuminating the Potential of Edmodo as an Interactive Virtual Learning Platform for English Language Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

English language acquisition is an area of study that garners a great deal of attention because stakeholders in education are continually looking for possible solutions and better pedagogical tools to make teaching and learning more effective. The emergence of e-learning and its Web 2.0 tools offer more opportunities in language application and encourage independent learning. Today, educators are urged to provide students with 21st century skills that are geared towards creativity and critical thinking and the generation of new knowledge, not merely implementing what has been taught. For English language learning and teaching, this paper aims to explore the perceptions of 3rd year Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) students at the University of Malaysia of Edmodo. It is a qualitative research study with singular focus on Edmodo, a social learning platform with over 52 million users, comprised of teachers, students and parents worldwide. The findings indicate four main advantages of Edmodo in English language acquisition. These areas are 1) suitability for English language learning, 2) an interactive interface, 3) an appropriate site for assessments and 4) a ‘different’ learning experience.

Keywords: Edmodo, virtual learning, English Language Education, TESL

Introduction

English is the lingua franca in today’s globalised world. Countries worldwide have made English one of the compulsory subjects in schools. Thus, non-native speakers are taking measures to ensure they are not lagging behind. Educators progress by ensuring they have the best pedagogies and teaching methods that involve more social context in learning (Woo and Reeves, 2007). The effectiveness of the traditional classroom setting and whether it is sufficient to equip students with 21st century skills is being questioned. Wise (n.d.) argues that a traditional lecture alone is inadequate, and that ideally, teachers ought to practice strategies that they expect their candidates to use and should model expert teaching. In this paper, we present four 3rd year TESL students’ journey in

exploring Edmodo while doing tasks on the site. The aim is not to model expert teaching, test their language capabilities, or teach the targeted language, but to discover their thoughts and opinions. As a result, we will learn how Edmodo can be used and how it is beneficial in language learning.

Scholars have urged educators to transform their teaching methods to be more student-centred and inculcate collaborative learning. In order to excel in this new quest, technology has been progressing rapidly to aid in the learning process (Stracke, 2013). In the latest classroom setting, teachers now use online materials, websites, videos, pictures, power-point presentations, and audio files to make learning attractive to all learners, regardless of differences, such as academic achievement, race, or background (Hart, 2011). In addition to these new tools, some teachers opt to introduce websites that may have immediate effects and a positive impact on the acquisition of knowledge. However, the use of some online websites and social networks are restricted in educational institutions due to constraints (Kist, 2013).

Additionally, Dalsgaard (2008) claims that the integral point of a social network is the mixture of personalisation and socialisation. With this notion in mind, the greatest invention of e-learning is when social network is blended with education; therefore, Edmodo might be one of the best platforms for social network and academic pursuits. It is an educational website that adopts the idea of a social network and transforms it into a site suitable for the classroom, regardless of students' ages or the institutional level. With the advent of technology, it is wise to explore social learning platforms as mediums of interaction. The partners are selected because they are both students and future educators of English. In addition to experiencing Edmodo as students, they will also benefit by experiencing how Edmodo functions for language teaching. This condition will minimise the issue set forth by Wise (n.d.) and hopefully new educators will not practice conventional methods of teaching, such as lecturing, question and answer, grammar drills and translation.

Potential Use of Edmodo for English Language Learning and Teaching

Under the paradigm of e-learning, there is social networking site geared towards education called Edmodo. Edmodo is known as the ‘Facebook for schools’ or the ‘Facebook look alike’ due to its layout and design. The following is from the BusinessWire (2014) explaining its exact mission:

Edmodo’s mission is to connect all learners with the people and resources they need to reach their full potential. On Edmodo, teachers are at the center of a dynamic and engaging network that connects them to students, administrators and parents, and surfaces the world’s best resources and formative assessment tools that contribute to better learning outcomes. Founded in 2008 and used by 91 of the top 100 U.S. school districts, Edmodo was designed to protect the privacy and security of students and teachers by providing a closed, private platform in which they can collaborate, share content, and leverage educational apps to augment in-classroom learning. These powerful capabilities enable teachers to personalize learning for every student. Edmodo is free for teachers and students and always will be.

Essentially, the founders have striven for a suitable, effective, comprehensive and innovative education tool for students of today.

Furthermore, technologies are advancing rapidly and are causing a student-led revolution in education (Rivero, 2013). This suggests that students are now the centre of attention and ultimately, focusing on education. In a way, this education revolution ensures that students are receiving the best quality of schooling through the best pedagogies accessible and the most innovative technology. Edmodo is a portal that presents information in an engaging and motivating way that becomes a controlled environment suitable for peer tutoring. Through Edmodo, students work with peers and are inevitably required to collaborate with others (Buescher, 2010); whether it is pair work, in small groups or within the class. This collaboration is a means for effective English teaching and

learning, however it is uncertain whether similar results are obtainable in Malaysia's learning environments.

Edmodo claims to encourage students to take the initiative for their learning by posting notes, uploading learning materials to the personal digital library, writing comments and much more. Moreover, learners are keen to participate in the learning process when they are allowed to explore the multimedia resources that are compatible with their learning preferences and needs. The applications available on Edmodo facilitate collaboration and virtual teamwork among students and accelerate the learning process (BusinessWire, 2014), making students proficient in handling tasks online.

As a result of limited allocation of time in classrooms, Edmodo may be able to provide a solution to teacher's time constraint problems. Edmodo allows teachers to do more assessing by creating polls, multiple choice questions, quizzes, fill in the blanks and other types of assessments which garner students' attention (Buescher, 2010). Edmodo provides for pools, alerts, quizzes, homework, grammar sheets, reading materials and sub-groups. These can be created effortlessly and accessed by students at any time. Edmodo is proof that using new technologies may generate enthusiasm in students (Chandler and Redman, 2013).

Due to Edmodo's nature as a site for education and social networking, students have already developed a sense of familiarity in using the portal. Thien et al. (2013) claim that:

social presence support learners to understand their roles in the community, project them online, and form relationships with others by projecting their personalities. Edmodo, with the User Interface similar to Facebook, encourages this sense of social presence by groups, Q&A, opinion polls and so on.

Therefore, familiarity encourages enthusiastic participation by students because as soon as they are logged in, they feel comfortable learning using the site. By implementing Edmodo, teaching English begins to be more interactive, effective and relevant for today's learners who are equipped with technology. Technology incorporation has taken social factors into

consideration when conveying e-learning programmes because they are linked to the manifestation of technical factors (Wu and Hwang, 2010). Buescher (2010) postulates that Edmodo is an easy way to integrate technology into students' assessments and the teaching process.

In the traditional classroom setting, the teacher is the centre of attention, while on Edmodo, the attention is shifted to the students and the teachers take on the role of a tutor (Schiller, 2011). Clearly, it is an example of avant-garde in teaching pedagogies and instructional methods. A winning feature of Edmodo is that it enables seamless learning opportunities in different situations because it is available on mobile phones, iPods, iPads and other smart gadgets. Thus, students do not have to access Edmodo from their computers or laptops. In the future, Edmodo may be a preferred platform for assessments and interaction, since students today are proficient users of technology.

Edmodo is an innovative tool which permits teachers to participate in a teaching methodology conversion because classrooms and engagement with students is more structured. Moreover, teachers agree that Edmodo is a catalyst and a motivator for transforming traditional instructional models by permitting learners to be actively involved in their learning inside and outside the classroom (Dobler, 2012). Edmodo has also successfully revolutionised classrooms in terms of students' engagement, because online tasks can be carried out effortlessly. Edmodo helps make educators' lives easier and saves them time (Schiller, 2011) by helping to check students' progress and monitor the submissions of assignments as well as other features. These features save teachers' time, which can be used in other productive ways, such as planning lessons.

However, these studies are mainly conducted overseas. The outcomes may be different if we apply it to the Malaysian education environment. It is useful to remain sceptical about study results exploring the perceptions of students on this subject, because the findings of previous studies could bias this research. To avoid such bias, all findings are questionable, especially in the Malaysian context.

Thus far, we have discussed Edmodo's roles in learning and teaching based on multiple studies on the implementation of this interface from its inception in 2008 until 2015 (Buescher, 2010; Geron, 2011; Schiller, 2011;

Dobler, 2012; Thien et al., 2013; Anbe, 2013; Pop, 2013; BusinessWire, 2014). Some of these roles are peer-tutoring, multimedia skills, critical thinking, global citizenship, personal and worldly connection, student engagement, cost-efficiency, mobile application, instructional transformation and many others. In a nutshell, Edmodo has enormous potential because it features social networking, communication and education altogether. Until now, it has been popular in the United States but has yet to become popular in Asian countries, including Malaysia (Alexa Internet, 2015).

Edmodo is an area of study that poses many questions and generates controversy on issues such as effective implementation and the perception of students in Malaysia because of very limited studies done on the tool in the country. At present, there are only two studies that mention this tool but none of them explore the perceptions of students, future teachers or teachers. One study discussed the prospects of implementing Edmodo by pointing to its possible advantages (Looi and Farrah Dina, 2011), while the other simply looked at the frequency of usage on Edmodo and compared it to other tools (Zahari, 2014). This lack of literature prompts us to further investigate the potential of this tool for students and future teachers in language learning and teaching. We believe there must be good reasons why a growing number of users visit the site and why it is well recognised in developed countries. Accordingly, we intend to explore the potential of Edmodo as an interactive virtual learning platform for English language teaching and learning.

Methodology Strategy

This study emerged from the interest in discovering views from respondents pertaining to the prospects and potential of Edmodo in language teaching and learning. The constructivism of Crotty (1998) states that meaning is not discovered but constructed and people derive meanings differently despite being exposed to the same phenomenon. Meanwhile, hermeneutics (Crotty, 1998) is participative and cannot be produced by the researcher. Symbolic interactionism, on the other hand, focuses on interpretations of environments through actions (Crotty, 1998). All of these theoretical frameworks fit the purpose of this study by disclosing the meanings and perceptions of participants. Purposive sampling is employed to yield the best understanding of this study (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2003).

Therefore, four 3rd Year TESL students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Malaya are selected as partners in the study. The research draws heavily on qualitative studies that focus on examining the perceptions of collaborators. There are two prominent instruments, namely, researcher (Yin, 2011) and interview protocols (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012). The data analysis involves processes that Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe as open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Throughout the process of perusing the data and findings, an interpretive method is adopted (Walsham, 1993) that allows us to read between the lines and reveal the multiple realities of the respondents involved. Over time, core themes and significant concepts emerged that help to illuminate the key features of Edmodo. We used the narrative approach to convey the information, to ensure that the facts derived mirror the participants' points of view (Lauritzen and Jaeger, 1997).

Findings

The interviews produced promising findings about Edmodo's advantages in English language learning. Many forms of assessments were posted, involving the four skills in language acquisition (speaking, listening, reading and writing). The responses from participants were encouraging and enlightening. Upon execution of open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) with adherence to the epistemologies (Crotty, 1998) adopted in this study, we attained noteworthy results. Some of the key points are as follows:

Suitability for English Language Learning

A critical issue related to language learning is the use of web-based technologies, particularly the advent of multimedia computing and the Internet has reshaped the mode of computer use in language. Edmodo provides a channel for swift change, which encourages acquisition of the targeted language, comprised of the four skills. Further, Yang (1999) finds a high correlation between second language learners' beliefs about language learning and their learning strategies; students' positive outlook in learning English through Edmodo is strongly related to their use of functional practice strategies that will later help them to be more a proficient user/speaker of the language.

I figured out that you may post any type of files and learn 4 skills at the same time as it can be done through the portal by giving me more chances to be exposed to English materials (audio, video and others). The quiz posted is on grammar which helps me to practice as I get more exposure to the language. Directly or indirectly I'm learning the language, that's how it has helped. Edmodo is a great site for interesting and interactive learning as well as a very relevant site to be used for language learning, especially English.

Edmodo 2/Rose/Interview

It can improve my English proficiency through the tasks given as it requires students to get it done using different skills.

Edmodo 2/Fatin/Interview

In terms of learning the skills, it's good for reading and writing. Writing skill is involved because as you type, you can check your spelling and make sure it's grammatically correct too so that you don't embarrass yourself in the virtual class. Reading assessment is good because you need to read properly and diligently online.

Edmodo 2/Farah/Interview

Evidently, Edmodo is compatible with English language learning and teaching. Because it is similar to social networking, it has the ability to adapt to diverse types of files and forms of communication. Additionally, the participants view the site as a tool for enhancing important skills for learning the targeted language because Edmodo is a medium for learners to conduct their discovery learning after the tasks are given. Such a criterion is crucial, according to Little (2007), because the development of language learning is comprised of deliberate effort and conscious reflection while completing assigned tasks.

Interactive Interface

Studying by using one of the e-learning tools available (insert Edmodo) is interactive and promotes self-learning. Additionally, the use of educational

resources with systematic information technology offers instructional flexibility. Edmodo provides a collaborative channel for discussions and interpretations of assignments and becomes an engaging alternative to hand-writing homework questions (Buescher, 2010). On Edmodo, the features and functions are clearer and engaging which suits the students' needs, it also can be regarded as a simple platform that promotes 'less is more'.

In terms of Edmodo's interface, I like it very much because it's user friendly, it has lots of functional and appropriate buttons, the fonts are pacifying to the eyes and suitable for reading, the colours are soothing and non-distracting compared to bright colours and the accessibility is also easy as you just need to log in or register which doesn't take much time.

Edmodo 2/Farah/Interview

The layout is very neat, simple and clean. It's also formal looking; it differentiates Edmodo from other sites, that it is used for teaching and learning. But even so, it's not dull. It has everything needed for teaching and learning, yet the students can communicate with each other and use it like other social network. Edmodo is user friendly as the buttons and icons are easily noticeable. Also, no problem occurred during signing in as well, I can either use username or email.

Edmodo 2/Rose/Interview

Past studies have proven that students who communicate with their classmates through Facebook are more intimate and friendly with one another (Tidwell and Walther, 2002). Therefore, Edmodo may provide a similar result, yet with better focus and educational goals. With its interface and outlook, Edmodo can be as successful as any other educational site. Additionally, participants can go beyond what is expected and explore other tools because of Edmodo's user-friendly interface.

Appropriate Site for Assessments

Due to poorly designed courses and assessments, students have become disinterested in learning and are difficult to retain (Mathema and Bista, 2006). This issue needs to be addressed to ensure that students retain information because assessments are one of the cruxes of effective learning. Buescher (2010) postulates that Edmodo offers an easy way to integrate technology into teaching processes and students' assessments. Apparently, practical and functional assessments have substantial effects on students' perceptions and academic success, and the rate of attainment can be guaranteed through the use of Edmodo in assessment delivery.

Edmodo can be used the same way you give assessments or homework. Edmodo is the right place for that purpose and to see students' progress. In class, Edmodo can be used as a medium to present input or you can teach traditionally but then you can give assessments through Edmodo.

Edmodo 2/Rose/Interview

Edmodo is suitable for formative assessment. Students are assessed based on assignments, quizzes, questions and tasks on the portal. All they need to do is respond to it online. In short, Edmodo can be used to give homework, which is a great feature!

Edmodo 2/Emme/Interview

Teachers are advised to create an encouraging classroom atmosphere in the English classes to generate positive attitudes toward English through the integration of appropriate up-to-date materials and supplementary resources in addition to English text books (Mohamad Jafre, Majid and Hanan, 2012). The use of Edmodo as a medium in formative assessment delivery enhances acquisition in English language learning. From the collaborators comments, it seems that Edmodo can be the salvation for teaching-learning processes in today's fast paced world.

A 'Different' Learning Experience

Edmodo offers an unusual learning environment that can be an escape for both teachers and students who feel confined in the physical four walls of

a classroom. Additionally, internet technology is increasingly popular in recent years, prompting language learning delivery to shift from physical textbooks to online-based applications. Further, to illustrate the importance of the participants' ideas, Lai and Gu (2011) assert that 'language learners were using technology to engage in out-of-class activities to regulate different aspects of their language learning experience, which is quite encouraging'. Edmodo is a refreshing site designed to support education and its goals, and this agenda can be seen by our respondents.

In normal classroom, maybe the classroom environment makes you feel sleepy, stuffy with crowded classmates. Sometimes we have about 40 students in one class so many do not like that condition, it isn't healthy for learning. But Edmodo provides equal chance for learning, for example not only the front students will get to see the multimedia pictures or video projected on the screen in front.

Edmodo 2/Rose/Interview

It makes learning process more informal, especially perfect for learning English.

Edmodo 2/Emme/Interview

I found that in terms of learning, it's new, refreshing and fun. When I said it's new, it's because of the online platform and not conventional classroom scenario.

Edmodo 2/Farah/Interview

Attitude, motivation, learning conditions and the use of strategies are some of the aspects that have been shown to have lasting effects for language learning (Ellis, 2008; Fathman, 1975; Ortega, 2009). Consistent with what the respondents indicated, Edmodo has the capability to have a significant impact in English language learning because it provides a newer platform than traditional classroom methods. Moreover, it serves as a 'social' space that fosters interaction and cooperation among students, which can be hard to achieve in a physical classroom.

Discussion

As of 2015, Edmodo has over 52 million users worldwide and is renowned as one of the most famous e-learning tools; especially in the United States (Alexa Internet, 2015). A number of educators and researchers have discovered several of its implications for teaching and learning. In addition to the studies above, Redman and Trapani (2012) indicate that Edmodo is a portal that presents information in an engaging and motivating way and presents a controlled environment suitable for peer tutoring. Moreover, respondents in this study like the idea of interacting and conversing with peers online because it is easier and engaging, which is consistent with the results produced by Gonzales and Vodicka (2012). Further, Edmodo, since its inception, has taken measures to look similar to the infamous social networking tool Facebook (Maguth and Harshman, 2013) but with an educational platform geared towards teachers that is also appropriate for students and parents. All of these studies have demonstrated the positive outcomes of implementing Edmodo for language learning and teaching. Hence, it is sensible and justified examine the results produced by Malaysian students in order for us to evaluate its practicality in Malaysian environment.

Despite the fact that Edmodo is often referred to as Facebook's look alike, it differs in terms of its usages, applications, buttons, target audience and functionalities. Indeed, Facebook is a social media that is currently becoming a teaching platform for teachers and students. Students who communicate with their classmates through Facebook are more intimate and friendly with one another (Tidwell and Walther, 2002). As teachers begin use Facebook as a medium for conducting lessons and interacting with students, they disclose more information about themselves and are approachable, which will lead to higher levels of motivation and effective learning in a comfortable classroom climate (Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, 2007). Facebook can be a contemporary technological tool that can offer teachers and students an opportunity to nurture the student-teacher relationship, which will generate positive learning experience for both. However, some schools and universities block its use within the school/university compound (Kist, 2013) to avoid misuse, security issues and disclosure of personal information. Blocking social network use prevents the creation of an online learning environment. Therefore, we

seek a tool that is academic friendly, offers unlimited advantages and can be accessed anywhere and anytime.

Conclusion

Through interviews, Edmodo has been identified as the future platform of English language learning. The emergence of various social media, sites, software and other aids related to education has yet to be proven effective. Edmodo, however, is a tool that provide the solutions to the worries, doubts and issues of all of the stakeholders in English education. Some of the main advantages of implementing Edmodo include the suitability for English language learning, an interactive interface, an appropriate site for assessments and a ‘different’ learning experience. All of these benefits are consistent with current global education goals that state that ‘students must focus on the importance of lifelong learning to continuously upgrade their knowledge and skills, to think critically and to inspire creativity and innovation so as to adapt to global change’ (UNESCO, 2004).

Through our discussions of the results above, we have illustrated the potential of Edmodo as an interactive virtual learning platform for English language learning and teaching. Based on this evidence, as well as previous studies conducted outside of Malaysia and supported by some of the key features mentioned in this paper, Edmodo may have a chance for implementation by educators in Malaysia. Further, Edmodo uses a bottom-up approach that gives teachers the freedom to decide whether to use the tool in their classrooms. Such liberty will facilitate the creativity, ability to nurture and flexibility of teachers in their lessons so long as the aims and objectives of learning and teaching are attainable. In summary, the use of Edmodo as a virtual classroom in Malaysia is a feasible idea for language learning and teaching.

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