

Encouraging Virtual Learning Management Systems: Preserving Learning Outcomes through Moodle Integration in a Writing Class

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Received: 03/09/2021

Accepted: 07/12/2021

Published: 26/12/2021

Abstract:

This study aims at diagnosing the significance of using technology-based learning, notably Moodle in enhancing EFL students' writing competence. Indeed, using Moodle as a new technological device is evident in attaining the learning outcomes, and can facilitate the learning and teaching processes, as it contributes in developing learners writing autonomy. To affirm this hypothesis and achieve the aim of the study, a research work has been undertaken with second year students at ENS of Laghouat using a particular research design for the study.

To collect data, an online questionnaire with close-ended and open-ended questions was designed and administered to the respondents who are 25 in number. Finally, based on the results of the study, we came out with the claim that successful implementation of digital technology depends not only on sufficient access to equipment, tools, and resources, but also on the availability of sufficient training, background knowledge, and support networks for teachers.

Keywords: Digital learning; EFL classroom; Moodle; Writing performance; Covid-19 pandemic

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- INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a vital integration of technology with education and learning process which has pulled a major part in people's life. It also affected our society in general and the individual in particular. In effect, the 21st century's students are considered as a digital generation, they have never recognized a world without internet use. Therefore, using smart phones or even laptop computers can enable them from all parts of the world to be in one place and share ideas, thoughts and even culture, and this extremely occurs through sending and receiving messages. Indeed, students can express themselves and thus be more independent as they are looking for faster, easier and smoother ways to achieve their goals.

Technology has become a significant tool in education, which is considered as an important source for foreign language teaching. Occasionally, technology has created online environments so that students can benefit from them. For many years, educationalists have been looking for effective ways including E-learning materials and methods to encourage students to learn English in order to achieve better academic achievements.

Many platforms are widely used in conducting research, Moodle is the best example, it is fast and universal, where students from different ages, nationalities, meet and exchange information, not only students can benefit from these platforms, but also teachers, they help each other in making exams, assessments and even preparing lessons, which can be useful. Further, Moodle tempts shorten the distance between the teacher and his students, and allow them to discuss lessons in better circumstances. Accordingly, students can attain favorable outcomes through using such platforms. Therefore, the need to look into its benefits is highly persistent for a better academic achievement of EFL students.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the importance of using technology in the English language context, particularly in the writing classroom. Also, to prove its role in enhancing the learner's writing performance in accomplishing tasks. The study yet

aims at shedding light at the multiple technological devices used to foster the writing process along with Moodle platform, also how Moodle can enhance the learner self-directed learning in academic writing in the higher educational EFL context.

This issue raises the question of the extent to which EFL students can increase their level of writing competence in learning online through Moodle platform. In other words, how can Moodle as a digital device contribute to increasing EFL students' motivational awareness about learning the writing skills and about being more competent in writing?

The research indeed addresses this problematic by assisting students to increase their writing skills and performance online. Therefore, we can hypothesize that in the EFL context, technology can help students improve their writing skills, as using Moodle in writing can be very appropriate and favored by students, since they are using technology in everyday life.

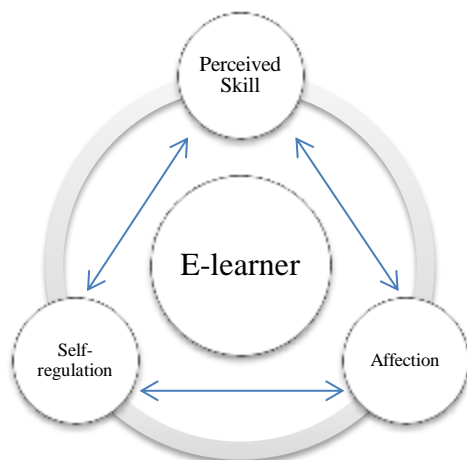
1. Review of Literature

There are many reasons why technological devices are very useful in the EFL classroom. It can enable students to interact and communicate more in English. Also, students can feel more comfortable in using the target language which makes them independent in expressing themselves. This can occur when practicing online drills. Indeed, online communication fosters students' thinking ability and communicative competence. Yet, online learning can provide students with a chance to communicate with native speakers. In doing so students can learn by themselves in their own way without having to worry about competitions in the classroom (Warschauer, 1996)

E-learning is involves using internet to learn and to teach. It is all about student-teacher or student-student interactions. (Morrison, 2003) Teaching is a process or an act of transmitting knowledge and information in a form of lectures, debates, or discussions; it requires the physical presence of both learners and teachers (Wolfgang, 2001)

The teaching process has changed through time, starting from the traditional methods such as Grammar translation method, direct method, communicative language teaching method going over the task—based, content-based, and project-based methods, till the computer assisted language method, which depends on the use of technology in learning and the involvement of the use of computers and cell phones in the classroom.

Fig. 1. E-learning Strategic Model



Source: (cited in Meng-Jung, 2009, p. 41)

Accordingly, there is a particular issue which makes the difference between traditional and modern educational classrooms. Traditional Education relies more on teachers rather than students, it is a teacher centered method where the teacher is the only one who present the lecture and the student receives the information; this method makes the students less active, and has less opportunities to talk (Brophy & Good, 2003) Nowadays, the educational curriculum has changed, due to the drastic change in technology and its integration to education. Modern technology is a more student-centered way of learning; the role of the teacher is only restricted to guide the learners and facilitate learning.

Modern teaching provides the learner with more opportunities to learn effectively and makes them able to correct their mistakes and

focuses on their learning (Dunlap, 2007)

1.1 Moodle Electronic Platform

Internet and computers are the best examples of tools to enhance both the learning and teaching processes (Suppasetserree, 2010). Computers are commonly used and they are very helpful in using drills for practice and improving all the language skills and grammar, listening, speaking and also vocabulary as students feel comfortable and satisfied in using them. (Celce-Murcia, 2001)

Education is the key and the basis of any nation. EFL teachers work so hard to convey the information to their students. They usually use particular teaching methods which can help students understand what they learn, students actually get bored from the traditional and unhelpful methods of teaching, and they eagerly would ask some flexibility and active interaction in their learning classes. Nowadays students are very familiar with technology, they can find everything they need through it, because it has become an indispensable tool in learning.

Moodle is the abbreviation of Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment which is designed by Martin Douglas at Curtin University, Australia. It is free software used to assist teachers and students to get high quality teaching materials. (Maikish, 2006) It is considered as one of the most widely online platforms; it can allow students to create a course website and can permit the exchange of information among users from all over the world, through chatting and discussion forums (Costa, Alvelos & Teixeira, 2012)

Moodle started to be used in the 1990's, the actual version was first released in May 2009, which consisted of many sites, countries, and different languages, which made this program worldwide and popular, because it is free, and runs on the major platforms of Windows, Linux and Unix, Mac OSX as well (Wu, 2008).

(Roberts, 2008) defines Moodle as “a place for creating learning opportunities, enabling learning through doing in a virtual environment,” according to the Moodle documents, which argues that

Moodle offers extremely advanced support network, and provides it to the learners' needs, adding to the great opportunities for innovating and other uses. (cited in Bogdan, 2010)

In addition, Moodle provides a very effective learning tool that supports blended learning and encourages the learner's motivation.

1.2 Writing Skills in EFL Classroom

Writing is a macro skill which requires cognitive efforts and training instruction. (Nunan, 1996) It is one of the most effective skills in the learning process. It is considered as a very complex skill and the most difficult to learn. This difficulty may involve the fact that writing skills are not immediately learned and accomplished in a task such as speaking. Also, students may suffer from linguistic difficulty along with pronunciation, spelling, and grammar. (Blanchard & Root, 2003) claim that writing in EFL classroom can be more difficult because the first language writing and the target language writing have differences in using grammar use, and lexical variety. This difficulty is due to the language they use in speaking which is not the same language used in writing. Cognition is another difficulty, through which learners may not be able to organize their ideas, and take time to brainstorm and write a piece of writing.

According to (Bello, 1997), writing is a productive language skill which contributes to developing language acquisition as learners attempt to use words, sentences, and communicate their ideas through writing using their learned grammar and vocabulary in class. (Crystal, 1999) admitted that "writing is not a merely mechanical task a matter of putting speech down on paper, it is an exploration in the use of graphic potential of the language- a creative process-an act of discovery" (p. 214) While (Celce-Murcia, 2001) asserts that "writing is the ability to express one's idea in writing in a second or foreign language and to do so with reasonable coherence and accuracy is a major achievement" (p.94) This indicates that students can express ideas, opinions, feelings they have already experienced or heard in a written way to foster their writing skills. This can occur through interpreting their ideas in a form of words, sentences, and paragraphs

in order to be read by other people, as writing can start from a small piece to a large piece of writing. In effect, teaching writing is a task to allow students to write, as it can be difficult to be taught regarding the approaches of teaching it which vary in their efficiency. Teaching the writing skills goes from product over process which can enable students to be more competent in writing by emphasizing ideas to produce a final product.

2. Method

The researcher has opted for a survey tool through which she can be conductive to the rigidity of the research design and get adequate interpretation of the findings. A survey research is viewed by (Kerlinger, 1973) as “a social scientific research and focuses on people, the vital facts of people, and their beliefs, opinions, attitudes, motivations and behavior’ as ‘the social scientific nature of the survey research is revealed by the nature of its variables which can be classified as sociological facts, opinions and attitudes” (cited in Mathiyazhagan & Nandan, 2010, p.34)

The methodology adopts a particular research design to make the study under investigation starting with a problematic , research objectives, and ending with a research solution. To enrich the analysis process, the researcher tempts to identify the conceptual frame, and then conduct an inquiry of certain aspects for interpreting the findings through data triangulation. Through the study, students have explained their learning process and experience in using Moodle as a digital tool in their answers to the survey. They also explored the benefits and value of using technological means, and how they can have adequate understanding, and achieve learner autonomy in studying writing skills online.

The data collection tool aims at illustrating how Moodle platform can contribute to enhancing students’ self-directed learning, and how students act and react to their learning progress. This tool tempts to assess students’ perceptions and beliefs on Moodle lessons and identifying rating scales which cover the conditions, learning

environment, teaching materials, and objectives of learning which are supposed to promote self-reflection and autonomy among students.

To ascertain the students' attitudes and responses about Moodle-based learning, they have been asked first to express their attitudes about Moodle as a means of teaching and its value in achieving self-directed learning. To carry out the analysis process, the researcher manages to conduct an inquiry of certain aspects for interpreting the findings through a qualitative interpretation.

The study was carried out with the effect of teaching EFL students through Moodle platform by incorporating lessons and tasks for students to be accomplished. In effect, the sample of the study amounted to 25 students who are selected from ENS of Laghouat department of English. A random sampling procedure was used to select students of English for the study. Percentages are used to analyze the participants' perspectives on learning through Moodle-based technology, and also eliciting their stands towards its efficiency in achieving their learning goals, and their autonomy competence.

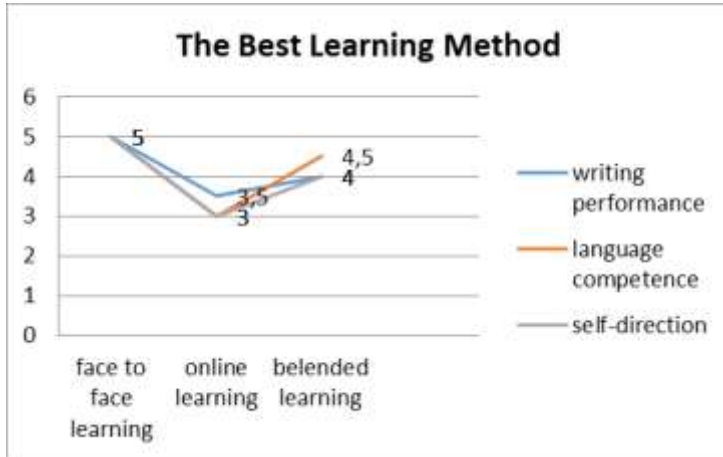
3. Discussion and Findings

To ascertain the answer to the research question about the effect of using Moodle as a learning material for writing lessons on students' attainment of learning goals, and thus achieving self-directed learning in performing a task in a writing class. Figure 02 depicts descriptive statistics about students' responses on some variables concerning Moodle instruction as a learning material and process.

This figure below reveals the respondents' answers about which learning method best fits their learning, fifteen of them chose face to face learning, three students prefer online learning, and seven of the participants go with blended learning. As illustrated below, most students (15) prefer face-to-face learning, because they find themselves more active, with a better interaction with the teacher, and the attention is all put on the teacher, six (07) of them agreed that blended learning is more effective, because it may provide a better quality of education and a mixture of both face to face learning and online learning, finally three students chose to study online, they

claimed that students in recent times became more digital in addition to that, it is more beneficial and practical.

Fig.2. Student's best Learning Method



The students have been asked about whether they prefer to use technological learning means, or handwriting to accomplish tasks in general. The figure below represented the students' preferences in learning, nineteen (19) chose to study using technological means, whereas six (06) of them preferred to use their hands in writing. The results above prove that the majority of students use technology in learning and in accomplishing their tasks in studying writing. This may be because they all have access to the internet and have laptops, and therefore it is easier and faster way to learn, while the rest preferred the traditional way of learning and using handwriting in writing their tasks.

Fig3. Learning through Technology

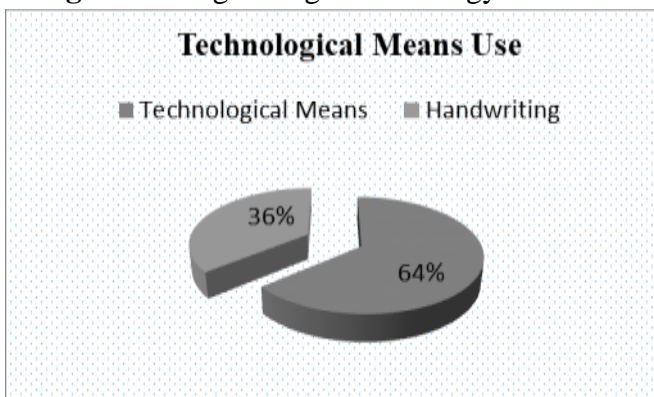
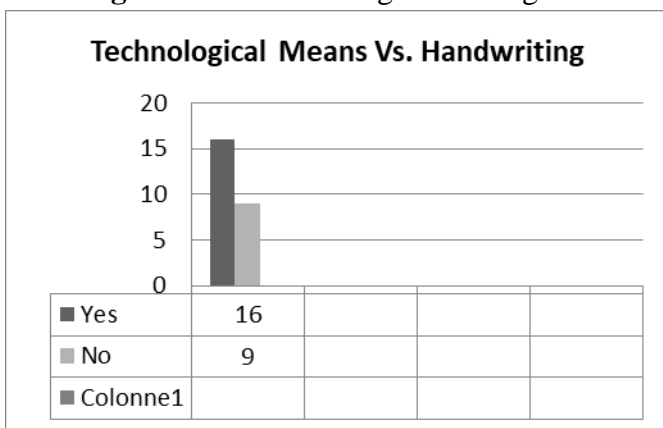


Fig.4. the Role of Using Technological Means



The figure above shows the impact of technology on the students’ writing, sixteen (16) of the participants said “Yes”, while five (09) of them said “No”. According to the results found, we can point out that technology roughly helped students in improving their writing skills, sixteen (16) agreed on this claim.

This may indicate students' excessive use of the internet in daily life, including social media, whereas only five (09) of them proved reflect that technology has never been a way to improve their motivation, language skills, and autonomy competence. Respondents have been yet asked about incorporating Moodle into the writing classroom. The question aimed at exploring whether this digital device can allow students to make research in an effective way.

Fig. 5. Use of Moodle in the Writing Class

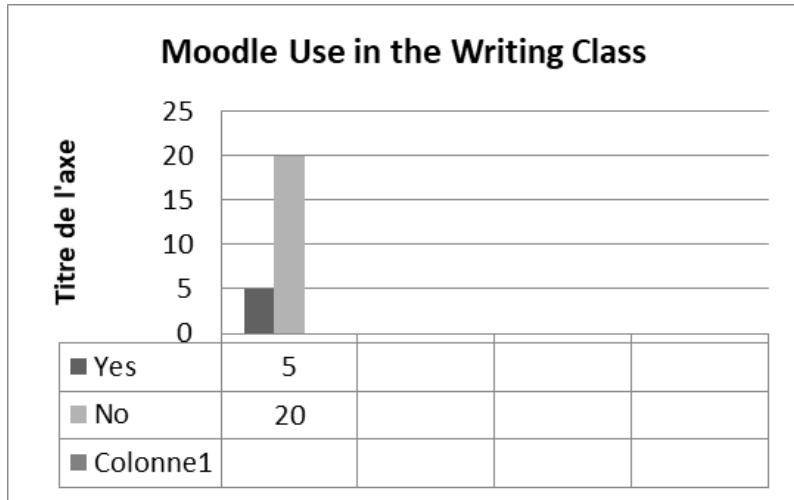
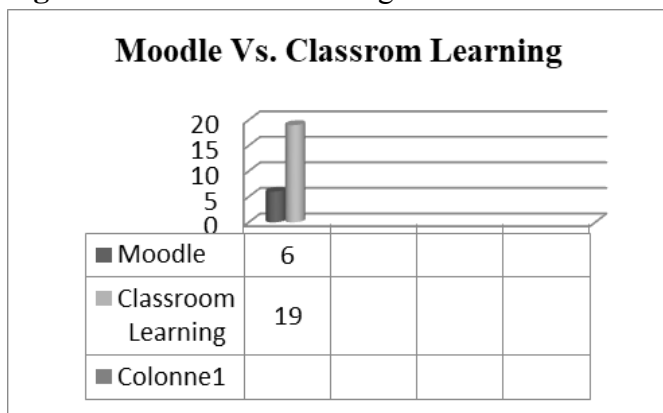


Figure 5 introduces the results which prove whether students can easily make research on the platform of Moodle, nine (05) of declare Moodle is an easy way to learn and make research, while twelve (20) of the participants approved the contrast.

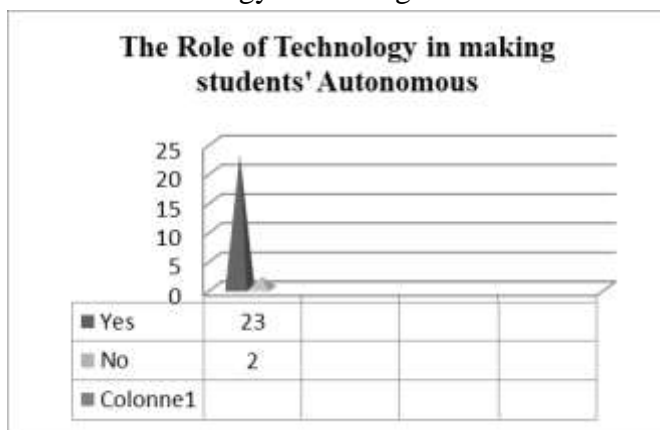
Accordingly, Moodle is not that good way to make research for the majority of the students, twelve (20) agreed on that Moodle is not a practical method to be used in their learning process, this may affirm the problems the students face when having access to this platform, whereas nine (05) of the students have a different view, where they can make research easily. The next question asked to students is about determining a comparison between Moodle platform and learning writing in class. Figure 6 demonstrates whether Moodle can help students adjust with learning writing compared to traditional learning method.

Fig. 6. Students’ best teaching method



The results show that most of the students didn’t really welcome the idea of using Moodle as a material of learning; most of them prefer to be in the classroom with the presence of the teacher, and with setting the lesson goals, choosing their learning strategies, interacting, questioning, debating, and sharing feedback. The next question was about above showed whether technology and digital learning can make students competent in writing, autonomous, and self-directed learners without the presence of the teacher. The figure below reveals whether technology can make students autonomous learners or not. Based on their answers, twenty three (23) of the students answered with “yes”, while only four (02) of them were totally against.

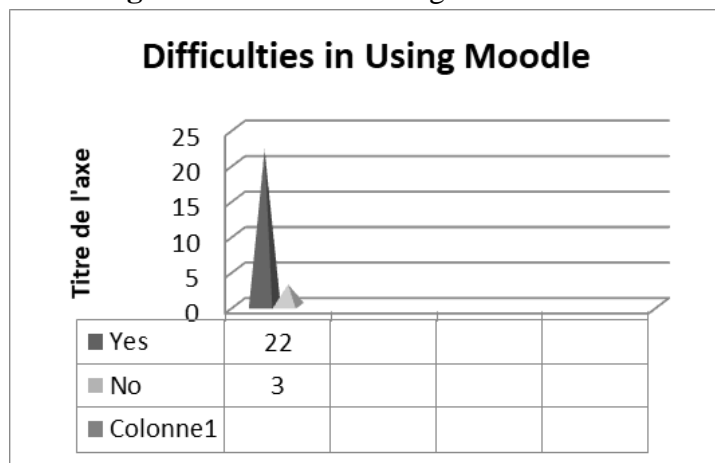
Fig.7. The Role of Technology in Making Students Autonomous



To be considered, regarding the students’ answers, most of them roughly like improving their learning autonomy using technology, they believe that they have access to more resources, depend on themselves, make researches, and brainstorm ideas.

Further, technology can provide learners with all kinds of information that are not usually available in a traditional classroom, at the same time a few students were against this idea, because they think students cannot learn without the teachers’ guide otherwise, they will be lost. The next question was about asking respondents about whether they are facing difficulties in using Moodle.

Fig.8. Difficulties in Using Moodle



The figure above demonstrates whether students faced some difficulties using Moodle in learning, fifteen (22) students claim that they face some problems using this platform, while five (03) of the students said “No”.

Apparently, after using Moodle as a means of research, students complained a lot from the fact that they had some obstacles, some said they have bad connectivity and network, for they cannot get access to the platform, some others said that the lessons are not well organized, few students had the opposite and they found no difficulties. The last question was devoted to recognize the students’ views about the use of Moodle in the writing class. Throughout this question, the researcher

needs to get the students' views about using Moodle in the writing class.

Based on the data collected, the majority of students didn't support the idea of using Moodle to study the writing skill, they believe that a writing class needs an interactive communication between the teacher and the student, as most of them prefer the traditional method in teaching writing. Thing that indicates that the classroom is a better place where the teacher provides feedback, corrects the students' answers, evaluate and assess their works. However, Moodle is a platform to upload and download PDFs not to improve any skill, particularly the writing skill, few of the participants agreed with using Moodle in the writing class, it encourages the students to learn more and try different new ways of learning.

The results obtained from the students' survey come to affirm the hypothesis of the study which indicates that technology can help students improve their writing skills. Further, the students' answers reveal that the idea of using technology in writing is very appropriate and accepted by students, since technology is being used in everyday life. Also, Moodle platform can be considered as a good integration in the writing skill lecture, but this is not very much confirmed based on the students' answers; they think it is not a practical way to do research in addition to the lack of access to the internet in the students' cell phones.

As most teachers see that Moodle is a platform which promotes the process of teaching and improves the atmosphere of learning to create motivation and independent learning.

- CONCLUSION

This study aimed at investigating the use of technology in the field of education. It tempted to affirm how Moodle as a new technological tool can contribute to fostering the students' autonomy, increasing their writing performance, and be competent in writing. The finding of the questionnaire confirms the hypothesis that technology on general and Moodle in particular can help in fostering learners' writing autonomy and facilitate the learning and the teaching

process. Throughout the study, the researcher tempted to explore the idea of using technology in the Algerian EFL context.

Further, this research managed to make learners to be familiar with Moodle platform as a new technological device, and prove the extent to which it can help students to be more motivationally aware, to and train them to be independent learners.

Based on the previous results, we can detect that teaching writing requires the use of technology inside the classroom. Therefore, further research may involve familiarizing students with authentic materials which include technological devices in order to facilitate learning and save time, This may involve using visual aids such as watching videos, movies, listening scripts, or audio visual aids such as pictures and written scripts... etc.

Indeed, in a writing class, teachers can also implement and choose appropriate and debatable topics for writing, and encourage their students to write without fear of making mistakes and also for getting rid of writing anxiety. Further, teachers should raise students' will for free writing, and motivate them to read a lot to develop their writing competence. Overall, teachers should create a comfortable and a favorable environment for learning through either classroom or online lectures, and also provide constructive feedback to help students to write more effectively.

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