



## Extending the Functionality of LMS for English Language Teaching

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### Abstract

*A learning management system (LMS) is a software or Web-based technology used to facilitate learning by providing a platform enabling easy access to learning content and resources by the learner. In recent years, there has been an explosion in the number of LMSs claiming to be the best in the market. However, most of the LMSs, if not all, are designed and developed by taking into account the needs of all institutions and all kinds of courses in a one-size-fits-all approach, ignoring the needs of a specific field of study. In this context, although LMSs offer a wide range of features and tools for accessing to learning content and administration, they do not meet the field-specific needs of courses. One of these specific field is English language teaching whose needs are mostly ignored in most of the LMSs. This study seeks to offer some recommendations based on the literature review and the experiences of the researcher for practical tools and features that can increase the functionality of LMSs for English language teaching.*

### Introduction

Using technology to support learning and teaching has a long history, however, the developments in ICT have come to a level of innovation we have ever witnessed. These developments in ICT have significantly changed the delivery channel of distance education and contributed much to the effectiveness of blended learning. All over the world, with the popularity of web-based distance education, the use of Learning Management System (LMS) is becoming the standard. In terms of blended learning, which is a search for the combination of the best of face-to face and online learning [1] LMS can offer substantial benefits by providing a more appropriate platform. In other words, “considering the inadequacy of classroom hours and the fact that most student learning takes place outside the classroom, an LMS can be extended to support and augment face-to-face courses” [2] An LMS is a web-based software package and e-learning platform used for facilitating online and blended learning and teaching. These web based systems “allow instructors and students to share instructional materials, make class announcements, submit and return course assignments, and communicate with each other online” [3]. In other words, LMS functions as a bridge between instructors and distant learners and provides a well-organized platform for distance and blended education. In parallel with the increasing use of LMSs, they are evolving rapidly based on the needs of web-based distance education and various features are being added to the LMSs in order to improve their functionality. However, despite the developments in LMSs, “... they are still pretty much one-size-fits-all. They aren't especially tailored to teach particular subjects to particular students in a particular way” [4]. Based on the features of 26 LMSs listed by Edutools Web site list, researchers claimed that [5]

Many LMSs also have the means to hold synchronous meetings and some ability to use various templates for instruction. Beyond these standardized features, LMSs tend to distinguish themselves from one another with micro-detailed features such as the ability to record synchronous meetings or the ability to download forum postings to read offline. These capabilities may be helpful, but they *only represent improvements to basic functions that are part of every LMS* [emphasis added].

On the other hand, some researchers claim that “web-based systems [LMSs] are common and mainly used for content delivery (i.e. information presentation) and all their functionalities for helping learning are not fully exploited...” [6]. This claim has some truth in it but the use of many features of an LMS, if not all, depends on various factors including the teachers' expertise and pedagogical and content knowledge. Moreover, field-specific needs of teachers and learners, most of the time, are ignored by designers and developers of LMSs since their primary aim is to produce an LMS addressing the needs of teachers and learners in a one-size-fits-all approach. This may be another reason why some teachers do not and cannot use various features of an LMS in their own fields since these features

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may be either not appropriate or useless for their own teaching needs. When it comes to language teaching, the researcher believes that the LMSs whether open-source (e.g. Moodle, Sakai) or commercial (e.g. Blackboard) do not meet the specific needs of language teaching and learning although they have features and functionality serving the general needs of all kinds of educational fields. Some LMSs have been offering solution to this problem by adding specific features to their LMS by adopting a modular approach; they offer the users a variety of features that can be added to the LMS if they want. However, I believe, this also is not an effective solution to the field-specific needs of teachers and learners but a pragmatic one. The use of various LMSs in all forms of education, for the sake of the study, in language teaching, can contribute to language learning and teaching to a great extent if they are tailored to the field-specific needs although it is clear that this solution is costly.

### **The need for a field-specific LMS in Language Teaching**

Distance language education offering many benefits for the learners and teachers [7] and blended learning combining the the best of face-to face and online learning are two trending topics in the field of education including language education. In these educational models, LMS plays a key role. However, most of the LMSs, if not all, are designed and developed for general use in online education, ignoring the needs of online teaching and learning of English language. In other words, commercial LMSs are not an appropriate solution for second language acquisition contexts [8-9]. In addition, open source LMSs like Moodle are also not adequate for online English language teaching. LMSs should meet the demands of specific fields and language education is no exception [10]. In the literature, there are also similar claims for the inappropriateness of LMSs for specific fields [11]. Therefore, there is a need for an LMS having specific features that facilitate online and blending learning and teaching environments for English language teaching.

## **Recommendations for Possible Features of an LMS for Language Teaching**

### **Corpus Tools**

Corpus is a collection of written or spoken language that is helpful in analyzing the real language use. It "... can be a powerful tool for students to use both with guidance in class and independently" [12]. In recent years, the use of corpus has been claimed to be effective in learning a language and it can be used effectively in a variety of subjects including grammar and vocabulary [13]. On the Internet there we can find corpora such as British National Corpus (BNC), Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), Michigan Corpus of American Spoken English (MICASE), etc. These corpora can be added to the LMS for language learners to explore the language themselves and see real language use with a variety of contexts.

### **Plagiarism Checker Tools**

In all LMSs, it is possible for students to submit assignments to their teachers. For essay assignments, students may sometimes cheat from the Internet and it is difficult for teachers to check them one by one with plagiarism tools like Urkund. If a plagiarism checker is added into the LMS that automatically checks students' essays for plagiarism, it will ease the burden of teachers to check the essays for possible plagiarism issues.

### **Dictionary Tools**

Any LMS used for language teaching should have a good dictionary for student use eliminating the need of forcing students to refer to hardcover or online dictionaries outside the LMS. Companies which design and develop LMSs can make agreements with well-known publishers of language teaching and add their dictionaries into their LMS as an integral part of them.

### **Voice Recognition and Pronunciation Tools**

With the developments in speech-to-text and affordances of computer programs in speaking of many languages with nearly proper pronunciation, such tools can be added to LMS. Students can improve their pronunciation with these tools inside or outside the classroom. Voice recognition programs can help students compare their pronunciation with the native speaker-like pronunciation.

### **Feedback Tools**

"Feedback plays an essential role in language learning" [14]. Whether it is written, audio or video feedback, an LMS should provide the teachers with necessary tools for giving these kinds of feedback. Written feedback tools can provide teachers notetaking features to evaluate and give feedback for online or offline written assignments. On the other hand, it is most of the time difficult for language



teachers giving written feedback to the students' assignments since it is a demanding and time-consuming task. Video and/or audio feedback tools which teachers can record their feedback with a video capturing or voice-recording tool can be a viable and easy-to-use option for giving feedback to the students.

### **Authoring Tools – Content Creation Tools:**

“Authoring tools are programs that aid teachers in developing computer-based learning materials...teachers can...create web-based materials including tests, quizzes and exercises... easily combine text, video, audio and image for creating more interactive and interesting materials” [15]. With an LMS having authoring tools, language teachers can design and develop effective multimedia-content language teaching materials by taking into consideration the specific needs of their students and objectives of their lessons.

### **Active Content Tools:**

Through the LMS, language teachers can upload lecture notes. These notes however are most of the time in a static format with no interactive elements. With a tool or a feature, lecture notes can be made an interactive piece of learning material, that is, LMSs should include a feature and/or a tool that allows students to comment and write questions on the materials. These comments and questions can be seen also by other students, making static lecture notes a collaborative learning material with the contributions of students.

### **Assessment Tools:**

The LMS for language teaching should have assessment tools including the ability of building different kinds of exercises such a fill in the blanks, multiple choice, matching, open-ended questions with short and long answers, interactive tests (with addition of video and audio content). The assessment tool can provide students timely exams or quizzes with immediate feedback out of the class and help them learn lesson subject better.

### **Conclusion**

Learning and teaching languages by incorporating distance or blended approach is becoming increasingly popular in line with the increasing affordances of educational technology. An LMS is a web-based platform for creating an appropriate learning and teaching environment for distance and blended learning. LMSs are developing in terms their functionalities with a modular approach, that is, *check-the-box* approach. However, adding more features to a given LMS may and cannot guarantee creating the desired learning and teaching atmosphere. In other words, *more is better* approach can be misleading. What is needed for an LMS to be more helpful and effective in any educational environment is an LMS equipped with field-specific features determined after an extensive need analysis since the needs of fields may vary greatly. In terms of language teaching, an LMS should have the pre-mentioned features and possible others which are field-specific needs of language teaching and learning. It is therefore the responsibility of LMS programmers to take into account the specific needs of language teaching and learning while designing and developing an LMS.

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