E-learning as a current trend in TEFL: The case of Dubai

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Abstract

The traditional ways of language learning and teaching are being blended with or replaced by e-learning or online learning, since it is found helpful in teaching language learners. In the same vein, universities and educational institutions in the Persian Gulf Region have given attention to and adopted e-learning. However, the universities and colleges in Dubai have used more e-learning innovations in their pedagogical activities than in other countries in the region. The trend is aimed at motivating students to study outside of the classroom and is, therefore, on vogue in the educational settings of Dubai. These technological innovations can directly influence the current university practices and may change the traditional definition of education as e-learning can be extended beyond the walls of classroom at anytime [1]. This paper is an attempt to analyze the e-learning practices in teaching English as Foreign language in Dubai, such as Blended Model of Language Teaching, Totally Online E-learning, Virtual Learning Environment, Virtual Classrooms, Second Life, Moodle and Sloodle.

1. Introduction

The number of Dubai universities and colleges which adopt e-learning as a part of pedagogical activities, has recently been on rise [2]. The trend is aimed at motivating students to study outside of the classroom. These technological innovations can directly influence the current university practices and may change the traditional definition of education as E-learning can be extended beyond the classroom at anytime [1]. For that reason, this trend is given attention by the educational settings of Dubai since it can “revolutionize how students work, think and access information” [3]. According to the University of Wollongong, most the universities in the Persian Gulf Region have an e-learning center for excellence [2]. They aim to make education and learning more efficient, by taking advantage of the merits of e-learning practices as “flexible timing, cost effective, lifelong learning, global teaching phenomenon, sharing of knowledge and academic productivity” [4].

2. E-learning

Online learning, often called e-learning, is the buzzword which is used to describe the use of “technologies to support learning, teaching and assessment” [5]. Brennan et al., cited in [5], described online delivery as computer technology which enhances, extends and replaces traditional teaching and training practices. Lowerison, Côté, Abrami, & Lavoie (2008) listed the potential benefits of e-learning as follows: increased access to information, increased flexibility of learning environments, personalized instruction, reduced cognitive load, increased learner control, and authentic learning [6].

As to the modes of delivery in e-learning, Harasim (2000) identified three; Adjunct Mode, Mixed Mode and Totally Online Mode. Adjunct Mode is described as traditional face-to-face courses that utilize online utilities to enhance course content [7]. The first two differ in the degree to which networking is integrated into the course. Whereas adjunct includes a small number of networking utilities that are added on, mixed mode courses include networking utilities as main components of the course [8]. The third mode includes fully online courses taught through computer networks as the primary environment for the course. According to DeNeui and Dodge (2006, p.257), some “scholars do not make the distinction between the first two modes, instead labeling any course that blends online components with more traditional face-to-face instructional techniques “hybrid courses” (Swenson & Evans, 2003)” [8].

3. E-learning in Dubai

The teachers and students of universities in the United Arab Emirates agreed “that information technology (IT) could successfully contribute to two ends: creating a blend of classroom materials and delivering those materials in multiple ways” [9]. They believed advantage should be taken of all available tools, including IT. Thus, language schools, universities and Higher Colleges of Technology
in the UAE have been making use of online learning “as part of the curriculum” [5] due to the twelve-fold Dubai e-Learning Declaration [9].

With its high-tech digital infrastructure, the UAE has laid the foundation stone for rapid advances in e-learning. In the same vein, the UAE has been holding bi-annual “Education Without Borders” conferences since 2001. Additionally, over the past few years, UAE Zayed University and the Higher Colleges of Technology have organized a series of semi-annual one-day workshops on e-learning. The UAE’s national University (UAEU) has taken the lead in adopting and implementing e-learning [11].

E-learning or online learning usually has two modes; namely asynchronous mode and synchronous mode. However, universities in the Gulf region have adopted both these modes of e-learning, in Harasim’s term the first and second types of e-learning; namely Adjunct and Mixed modes. According to Al-Mekhlafi (2004), many of UAE colleges prefer having a merger of online teaching (asynchronous or synchronous) and onsite teaching (face-to-face) teaching [12].

### Blended model

The blended model of delivery is “delivering educational materials via multiple means, including textbook, online Learning Management Systems, the Internet, the Intranet, and CD ROM” [10]. Having constructed Dubai Internet City, Dubai Emirate hopes to take the lead in the IT in the area [13], reflecting the stress on IT and English skills in the education of the UAE.

Since 2003, online components are added to the courses at the universities across the UAE. By way of example, in the American University of Sharjah dozens of instructors have adopted the blended format as their teaching paradigm. “In fall 2005, the university established "ilearn," a unified platform for online learning, where all university subjects automatically receive space for pedagogical interaction” [11].

Moreover, the students from the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) can use English on the Internet since the medium of their instruction is English, as clearly stated in the policy outline on the College website [13]. English Language teaching in the HCT supports the objectives of the HCT mission statement so that the graduates “have the linguistic ability to function effectively in an international environment” [14].

Additionally, the eBerlitz blended courses in Dubai mix the effective and flexible online learning option with live individual or group tuition learning via internet (BVC), live tuition in your company or at a Berlitz Center of your choice [15]. Depending on the individual training focus, there are three eBerlitz Blended program options:

1. 90% Online – 10% live
2. 75% online – 25% live
3. 47% online – 53% live

### 3.2 Totally online e-learning

#### 3.2.1 Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Basically, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is “an integration of more flexible, comprehensive and dynamic communication and online three dimensional technology used for education purposes” [16]. Second life (SL), “a free online synchronous 3D virtual world (also known as a Multi-User Virtual Environment, or MUVE)” [17], is a good example of a multi-user virtual environment. It has expanded in education where its usage with Moodle, a learning management system, has created Sloodle, a learning system for virtual paces [18]. The majority of research and case studies show that the use of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) enhances student’s motivation because the activities are comparable and close to real world and require effective interaction during studying (Leng, Dolmans, Muijtjens & Vleuten, 2006, cited in [16]).

#### 3.2.2 Sloodle

Surridge and Shammas (2009) defined Sloodle an object-oriented dynamic learning environment for Second Life” [19]. The “Dubai-Korea Virtual Cultural Exchange Project” used Sloodle as a learning management system and Second Life a virtual place for all the related final activities [19]. This project was conducted for learning English as a Second Language (ESL) for seven weeks in 2008. A variety of technologies, including the Moodle web-based learning management system, podcasts, video conferencing and the virtual world of Second Life, were used to support both interactions among...
students and learning [19]. “Moodle formed a single point of entry for all the varied class activities, integration with Second Life being supported by ‘Sloodle’ [19].

In the Dubai-Korea Virtual Cultural Exchange Project, students were required to develop their abilities to repair and maintain what could have been a faltering conversation in case of any differences in pronunciation between the sides [19]. To foster students’ self-support and independence in English, skills of planned interaction, topic selection, response-consideration and communication maintenance were intentionally built into the course activities [19].

At the start of the session, having found out a little about each other, the KAIST and DWC students “communicated via prerecorded audio files, coordinated by placing the audio files in a Moodle audio forum (using Moodle plug-in module “Audio Recorder 1.1”)” [19]. The activity allowed the student to have an asynchronous voice-based conversation for over several weeks.

For the next activity, each group prepared a “culture capsule” containing a few small objects showcasing its culture. They posted them to each other. In a video-conferencing session, students could see and hear each other live for the first time, and opened the gifts. “This live video conference was then followed by another asynchronous activity: a video exchange, where each group of students prepared small videos of their own choosing to illustrate their college life” [19].

The next activity in the course was a “Second Life text-chat discussion in their group pairs”. In this activity, students were able to practice their skills of written English in an informal and real-time environment. Second Life was used for the final activities in a seven week class. All class activities – including those using Second Life – were focused on student-student interactions to provide a context for learning English.

4. Concluding remarks

e-learning is proved to be influential in language learning and teaching. For that reason, the educational settings of Dubai have given more attention to e-learning since it can “revolutionize how students work, think and access information” [3]. Therefore, Dubai is taking advantage of new technologies, shaping the new digital age, and has been practicing e-learning, whether blended or totally online, through new technologies such as Second Life, Virtual Learning Environment (VLEs), Moodle, and Sloodle to change the quality of its EFL teaching and learning activities.

References


