



Moodle? Poodll? Let's have NOODLL - A New Optimized Open Distance Language Learning Model

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According to a recent study "Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds" [1], 8-18 year-olds in the U.S.A. spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes on some type of media across a typical day, which means there has been a dramatic growth in the use of multimedia among this digital generation who had grown up surrounded by digital content in the past few years. Consequently, this significant increase in the use of digital media has changed our educational concept of students being consumer of knowledge content to critics and creators. In other words, educators around the world are now asking how to reach this digital generation where they live through making the best use of their media skills to engage them effectively and to make learning come alive in core curriculum subjects, in so doing to improve their overall academic performance.

In spite of educators' awareness of the increasing need of conceptual shift from centuries-old teaching paradigms to the increased focus on enablement of learners and powerful combination of teachers and technology, some experts point out that there remains a gap between the vision and the tools needed to achieve it, and "education institutions are not responding enough to the changes needed to curricula to recognize newly learned skills".[2]

In light of these facts and discussion presented above, this paper aims to identify the challenges we are facing in our Chinese language programme at Massey University in New Zealand and on the basis of which, to propose a new language teaching and learning model. It is hoped that this new model will engage students more actively in the learning process, turning them from passive recipients of linguistic knowledge to real life communicators in the target language speaking environment.

An initial review of the provision of the technological infrastructure, the use of innovative tools for language teaching and learning, and the use of multimedia in both internal and extramural papers revealed that currently we are facing a number of challenges in the following respects:

1) Although Moodle is our current main teaching platform for language papers, including delivering course contents in either text, video or audio format, submitting assignments, administering tests, conducting e-tutorials, and providing a communication channel between students and teachers, we felt that the wide range of pedagogical and administrative features and numerous activities and functions offered by Moodle have not been used to its full potential, especially in terms of using it to actively engage students in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and to provide intellectual excitement, challenge, and fun for students.

2) Language teachers often find it difficult to use Moodle to prepare supplementary audio and visual materials, such as how to pronounce Chinese tones correctly and how to write Chinese characters, to help distance learners due to the fact that Moodle does not provide direct audio and video recording functions. The lack of access to the use of third party programmes and the time consuming conversion of audio and video files to the specific digital formats suitable for embedding in Moodle pages often further prevent teachers from using Moodle as a means of strengthening students' learning.

3) Despite the fact that Moodle has built-in interactive and collaborative tools such as chat, forum and wiki pages, and that our language teachers have been working hard to encourage students to use them, the number of students who use them and the extent to which student have used them are far more than satisfactory. The root cause of this may lie in that the teaching and learning model of our Chinese papers based on Moodle platform are more traditional and in a more teacher-centered learning format, which make the online learning environment less attractive and interesting for student to use.

In response to these challenges, a new language teaching and learning model NOODLL is proposed. This new model integrates various Moodle existing functions and functions of Poodll, which is a set of plugins for Moodle to enhance Moodle activities. For example, using Poodll, users can directly record audio and video files anywhere in Moodle, users can also draw pictures in Moodle, which is in particular useful for learning Chinese characters, as students can practice writing on the screens of their smartphones or tablets and send them to their peers for sharing or to teachers for feedback. Poodll also allows users to submit their assignments with video and audio files and teachers to give feedback directly via audio and video recordings. Poodll also provides a range of useful widgets such as flashcard and timer which can be used to build courses and to turn them into a language lab.



NOODLL also takes into account of the emerging trend in mobile learning. According to NMC Horizon Report 2013 [3], there will be a shift from teaching in a classroom-centered paradigm of education to an increased focus on learning, which happens informally throughout the day, in other words, what learners need nowadays in this digital era is a anywhere-anytime-learning paradigm. Since mobiles are always personal and always at hand, they are perfectly suited to support informal and contextual learning, they therefore have a role to play in bridging the formal and informal learning spaces. Moodle developers recently released official cross-platform Moodle Mobile app, which enables students to use Moodle outside classroom and enhances students' learning experience greatly. The design of NOODLL follows the usability guidelines in designing mobile learning portals to achieve efficiency, effectiveness and satisfaction of learning.

In brief, NOODLL is a **New Optimized Open Distance Language Learning** model. Below is a brief account of its features:

- **New:** it is not a plugin itself, rather, it is a new design of teaching and learning model based on Moodle and Poodll and other elearning resource creating tools such as Hot Potatoes, Quizlet etc.
- **Optimized:** the integration of the above elearning tools not only helps to create more enjoyable language learning experience for students and to make their goals more achievable, but also offers an elearning environment and virtual classroom that are cross-platform and more user-friendly for students.
- **Open:** In light of Moodle's designing philosophy, which is people-oriented and student-centered, and that learning environment should help to stimulate students' interests and enthusiasm in learning, NOODLL is designed to be highly personalizable, allowing students to easily choose from a range of activities to cater to their own learning styles, experiences, interests and competencies. NOODLL also uses the interactive and collaborative tools to promote online interaction and collaboration among students.
- **Distance:** here the term is used in a broad sense; it refers to anytime-anywhere-learning as discussed above. This model can be used both in self-learning and with the help of teacher.
- **Language Learning:** since the process of learning a second language differs greatly from that of studying other subjects, NOODLL takes into account of factors such as ways to provide feedback at different competency levels, effective methods used in online interaction, designing principles of online language activities, the role of student autonomy for the online learners etc.

Below is a screenshot of the initial NOODLL design, the types and numbers of activities and tools are highly flexible according to course contents and students' competency levels. It has two main components: **Study the Lesson** and **Let's Get Real**. The first one is the lesson presenting section, which introduces students to the new language knowledge and provides students with multimedia resources and various interactive activities. For example, in the Vocabulary part, activities such as Poodll flashcards, quizlet flash cards, dragging and dropping words, filling gaps, matching words and images are created for students to learn and practice the words. A Journal activity is also created for students to reflect on their learning experience. In addition, chat function is provided for students to interact with each other during their learning to promote collective learning and collaboration. The second component is where students are expected to use their media skills creatively, enabling them to become resource producers and real target language users. For example, guided by teachers, students may use wiki pages or book activities to collaborate on a language project, say write a story using what they have learnt. This creates a dynamic interaction among learners and makes them become problem solvers, as they have to put into practice what they learnt in the first section. Using Poodll audio and video recording functions, students can even create audio books or video mashups, which in turn may stimulate students to more actively engage with the course materials.

It should be noted that although NOODLL integrates a number of elearning tools to facilitate students' learning, the technology itself cannot be used to replace teachers; it is the combination of teachers, technology, and advanced educational concepts that make the new design more effective and powerful. Great efforts should always be made to investigate learners' needs, elearning tools' teaching potentials, and to adopt proven teaching methodologies before customizing and implementing NOODLL.

References

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