

MAXIMIZING L2 INTERACTION THROUGH USING EDMODO IN SAUDI EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Many EFL students encounter massive difficulties when learning English and that is mostly due to the limited input of the target language (TL). English in EFL context such as Saudi Arabia is used only inside classrooms, and that leaves students with little opportunity to use TL through natural interaction. To overcome these problems, teachers of these contexts are always seeking new methods to prompt the English performance of their students. One way which is found to be of great effect is through the use of technology. Technological approaches have been widely recognized to facilitate the rapid growth in communication and information access. A great interest has been shifted to the concept of blended learning (BL) in English classes. This article sought to investigate the effectiveness of implementing a free e-learning platform; namely Edmodo, on the learning, interaction, motivation and classroom dynamics of L2 learners. The study also aims to examine Edmodo's eligibility in elevating the language level of foundation year students studying at the English Language Institution (ELI) at King Abdul Aziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. For this type of research, a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed to gather data from 60 female students placed into two separate groups. A positive correlation between students' English proficiency and the employment of Edmodo was observed. It is intended that the research will contribute to the body of knowledge and raise awareness of the use of blended learning in EFL classes.

Keywords: Technology, Edmodo, EFL, Blended learning

Introduction

In the past decade, technological communication has played a fundamental role in many life aspects and recently it has shown a major effect in the field of education. Many empirical studies have considered the

importance of teaching and learning of all subjects through technology, where English is no exception. In English traditional classroom setting, students are very dependent on their teachers which make them passive learners whereas implementing blended learning help students to be autonomous and more responsible of their own learning. Recently, many research projects aim to investigate the benefit of using different forms of technology inside classrooms from which Edmodo is one of them (Khwaileh and AlJarrah, 2010; Addison, 2011; Serin, 2012 and Osang, et al., 2013).

In many contexts where English exists as a foreign language (EFL), such as China, Turkey, this problem of the disconnection between the inside and outside of the classroom is compounded by the fact that students are learning their second language (L2) while living in their L1 environment (Barrs, 2012). In Saudi Arabia as well, English continues to be a language used solely for educational purposes. Surely enough, it is overwhelming and yet challenging for English teachers to teach and motivate students in such context. Nevertheless, the country does provide learning facilities in educational settings. Students have access to the internet through their smart phones and tablets, making it quite possible to apply blended learning in an L2 context. Since most EFL teachers have realized the need to make a connection for L2 both inside the classroom and outside as well, a blended learning approach is essential in facilitating a successful L2 experience.

The principal area of investigation in this study was whether or not students would participate and interact in an online platform that would facilitate L2 practice. In this way, it can be seen as beneficial both to the students in terms of their language learning, and to teachers in terms of being able to increase the ways in which students can be engaged in L2 practice.

What is Edmodo?

Edmodo, which is known to be the 'Facebook for Education', is a free and secure learning website which was introduced to the world of technology by Jeff O'Hara and Nick Borg in 2008 and could be accessed at www.edmodo.com (ChadaKongcham, 2013). All stakeholders in the educational field could benefit from the different channels this site offers. It allows for educational social networking such as group discussions, posting pictures, web-links, submission of files in a controlled and secure online environment, and is accessible through computers and smart phones (Barrs, 2011). Even though Edmodo is a free site, it is private in a sense that it only permits teachers to create groups for their students who could only join through a group code sent by their teachers. The teacher can control group activities, create quizzes/assignments/crossword puzzles, and keep track of students' progress. This innovated platform is found to be very useful for

both students and teachers as their interaction is not only limited inside the classroom, because Edmodo allows online interaction at anytime and anywhere (Hourdequin, 2014). In regards to the effect of Edmodo on classmates, it has been noted that Edmodo strengthens the relationship between peers and that eventually leads to an effective classroom communication (Mills and Chandra, 2011).

Literature Review

EFL Learners and Teachers

Learners of this era are seen to be digital natives who prefer to socialize and interact through various online channels. This shift in their preference does not only affect their social life but also their learning strategies and styles. When The British Council (2007) undertook research among learners around the world, their study results asserted that 69% of learners experience effective learning when socializing informally. It also shows a positive connection between the use of networks and students' academic progress (Arroyo, 2011).

As for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, Harmer (2014) emphasizes that "the ability to direct the students to other resources for research, preparation, practice and input – and to mix or blend these resources with course books and other in-class materials- gives the teacher a much broader and more varied 'palette' to work from than ever before." However, as teachers, it is necessary to carefully consider where online material contributes most appropriately in connection with the things being taught in the class (Harmer, 2014, p.205).

EFL Blended Learning Practices

The idea of a blended learning environment is that of which both the teacher and students work with an interconnected mix of books, classroom presentations and activities, and digital resources including online material or smart phone apps (Harmer, 2014). To support the debate on the importance of incorporating a blended learning strategy in an EFL classroom, several studies have provided evidence of the usefulness of online interaction between students and teachers through the use of Edmodo as a platform for online learning.

Investigating the effects of Edmodo microblog, Nevas (2010) conducts a study examining his students' involvement and performance. The finding show an increase in communication among students, and it encourages them to become involved in many different challenging activities. Other studies have also been conducted by scholars who were interested in exploring the use of Edmodo inside classrooms and its' effect on the learning and teaching process. Among those is Thongmak (2013) who

carries a study on university students to explore the use of Edmodo as a classroom collaboration tool and to view students' perceptions towards Edmodo. The results confirm that the application of Edmodo will aid distance teaching and enrich physical classroom learning. Likewise, Sanders (2012) examines Edmodo's effect on students' engagement and their responsibility for their own learning. The findings clarify that the implementation of different and interesting aspects of Edmodo prompts students' engagement and that leads students to become more responsible for their own learning. Barrs (2011) notes the benefits that he has found from using EDMODO with his classes as not only limiting to staying in contact beyond the classroom but also during extended holidays and vacations. The platform is also great for archiving links to web pages and online context such as YouTube videos and online news articles. The featured tools such as the calendar option can be accessible by everyone in the class, and assignment submission and keeping track of who sent what and when is quite helpful. Furthermore, Barrs (2011) adds that Edmodo gives students extra opportunities for interaction and self-access learning beyond the walls of the classroom, which is valued as an approach to language education.

What these studies appear to show is that online learning takes away learning anxiety. Additionally, they can be proof of the support that online learning outside of the classroom can provide for learners who are less likely to speak the target language (TL) in their educational context. In classrooms where inhibition prevents student interaction, online connection can bring down this barrier of learner anxiety.

Methodology and Research Site

Participants

To investigate the aim of this study, data was collected from two different classes of Saudi foundation year female students, studying at a King Abdulaziz University (KAU) and registered in 102English Intermediate level courses. All 60 students in these two groups were chosen randomly by administration and placed in level 102 based on their previous test scores. Both classes had equally 30 foundation year students with the same English proficiency level as determined by the Placement Test, which is held by the English Language Institute at the beginning of every academic year for all preparatory/foundation year students. Both classes were taught only by the two researchers respectively in order to observe students' progress and pay attention to any obstacles along the study. Edmodo application started at the beginning of the course and continued throughout the module which is a seven-week course. The two groups of students received the same method of teaching. Both teachers were in constant contact with each other, as they planned and designed their lessons throughout the entire module course,

using a blended learning approach. The university's computer labs were utilized to help students access Edmodo on campus until they became accustomed to using this educational website on their own.

Research Site

The experiment took place at the English Language Institution at KAU. This location was chosen as one of the major centers for English language instruction in the country, dedicated to provide intensive instruction of English as a foreign language to students of higher education. This Institute uses an internationally-oriented curriculum delivered to foundation-year students in order to enhance their English language skills and facilitate their academic progress. The foundation year English language program is designed to help students achieve an intermediate level of proficiency in the use of the English language (B1 CEFR), the university's defined minimum English language competency, within one academic year. The program has four levels of instruction, correlated with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and focuses on developing students' language skills in general through an integrated skill curriculum that develops all four language skills; reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Research Methodology

Research is a systematic way of investigation to detect a problem and thus find solutions to overcome the case. The present research aims to investigate Edmodo as an effective platform to teach English to foundation year students. Therefore, the study was carried out following explanatory mixed method principles. It incorporates two approaches; quantitative and qualitative. The findings are backed up by self-observations of the two authors, as they were part of this study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Approach

This approach is applied when analyzing the results of the collected data in terms of numbers. The analytical nature of this method helps to provide a specific degree of confidence.

For this study, an independent pre and post-test were the collected data throughout the course and later analyzed using percentages. The quantitative approach offered a great opportunity to the researchers to observe clearly the differences found in both tests' results. In order to investigate the impact of blended learning in this experimental case study, students in both groups were given the same number of tasks and

assignments in the form of pdf files that were posted on Edmodo for their convenience. Students were then asked to complete the assignments and send them back to the teacher in the form of e-mail. An overall average of 73% of students had completed these assignments. Edmodo was used as the one and only platform for incorporating online quizzes as well as gamification through the use of vocabulary crossword puzzles and grammar matching sentence games. Mixed activities were used to stimulate students' interest in learning English and encourage them to express themselves in English. Schuna (2010) asserts that educational games help students to focus, retain information, and they cater a high level of challenge.

The study design was to have a pre-experimental and a post-experimental test application. The post-experimental test was administered at the end of the course to see if students had achieved better results in comparison with the marks that they had received in the pre-experimental tests at the beginning of the course. The tests were for the purpose of evaluating students on different language skills including reading, vocabulary, and grammar. See figure 1.1 and 1.2 for pre and post experimental test marks of each group.

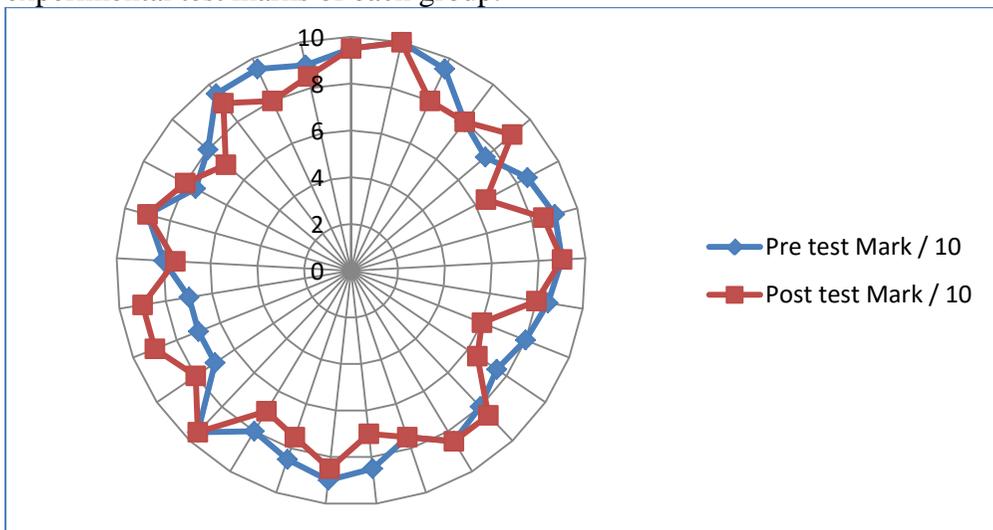


Figure 1.1: Group 1 pre and post experimental test marks

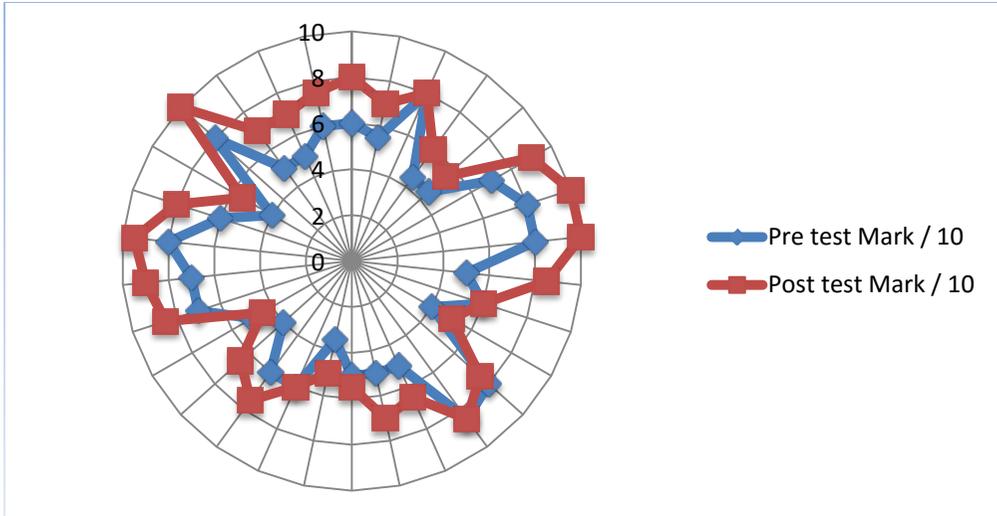


Figure 1.2: Group 2 pre and post experimental test marks

It was noted from the pre and post experimental test analysis that over 50% of students in both groups had shown improvement. As an overall achievement, 52% of students had shown strong improvement, 30% had retreated and 18% showed stability (See figure 2 below). These experimental test results were an initial indication that the seven-week course, using a blended learning approach, was an overall success. At the end of the course, all students had passed their Intermediate Level English 102 (CEFR A2) with impressive results.

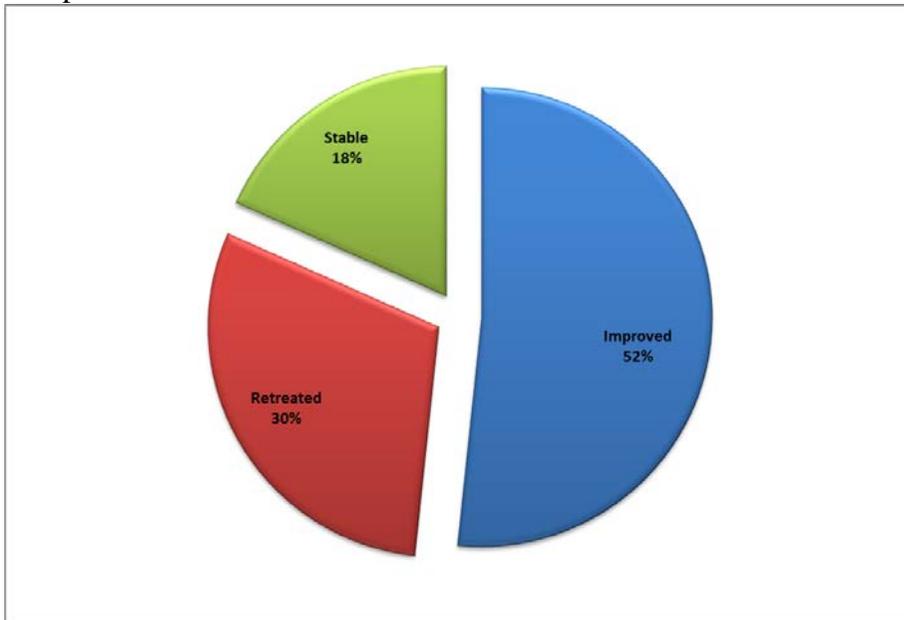


Figure 2: pre and post experimental test analysis of both groups combined

In terms of students’ activity on Edmodo, more than 75% had shown interaction in the online crossword puzzles, and more than 50% had participated in online quizzes. Students in both groups were also asked to complete an online survey regarding their opinion of the simulator activity for grammar practice, and 58% of students were in favor of this activity, while 45% stated that they learned something new from such activity, and 40% thought it was quite an easy activity for them. As for the Edmodo forums provided by the teachers, which aimed at encouraging students’ participation in an online discussion, four interactive forums were used with these classes and students would frequently express their opinions through writing. The online discussion was new to these university level students, and yet their responses were a representation of their English proficiency level signifying a good attempt to express themselves with very few errors. See figure 3 below for a collective display of students’ interaction on Edmodo using all forms of learning tasks.

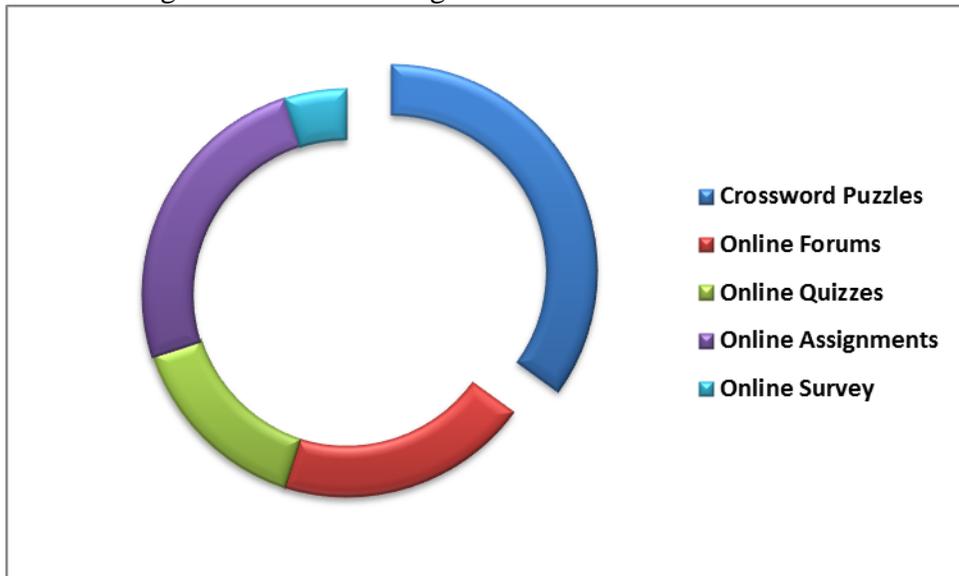


Figure 3: Students’ interaction on Edmodo

Qualitative Approach

In the field of teaching and learning, this method is of great effectiveness in delving deep into the proposed case and in studying the problem as a whole and not merely in separate components. On the one hand, it helps the researcher to immerse in the studied context. On the other, it allows interaction between the researcher and participants where the latter are provided with some space to express themselves freely. One effective method of qualitative approach is observation. Observations were conducted

during the entire period of this study by the two researchers who were teaching these two groups of EFL students. Being greatly involved with the participants, helped the researchers to view different study aspects, such as student’s perception at the beginning and at the end of study, interaction, and most importantly their level of motivation which at the end of the course was rated high compared to the start. Additionally, observation also served both researchers to monitor students’ progress, assess their development and give immediate feedback on-site. The following two sections will shed the light on some of the remarks noted by the researchers.

Researcher 1 Remarks

As much as I was optimistic about using new technology with students, I had noticed some resistance among these learners at the very beginning, especially since they had never heard of Edmodo. Therefore, I had to constantly remind them of its importance and how it was part of their continuous assessment grade. Since grades are the main concern of foundation year students, it seemed as if they were afraid of trying something that could jeopardize their GPA. There were however those who were enthusiastic about the new Edmodo App which they had never used before. Gradually, I noticed students who were reluctant at the beginning were starting to be drawn into this new experience and finally appreciating the benefit they sought through it (Figure 4).

I had experienced better communication with the e-learning group, as we would be constantly communicating in a virtual world. I even grew to know the e-learning group better based on their participation in the class forums, in which they would frequently express their opinions through writing. Also, collaborative work was very common throughout the course, as students would spontaneously pair up while discussing assignments and tasks. At the same time, when this experiment was conducted, I was teaching another section of the same level; 102. Students in this section were extremely quiet and well behaved, but they were not motivated. I believe that if they had experienced e-learning through Edmodo, they would have advanced further in their L2, particularly through collaboration.



Figure 4: Poll results

Researcher 2 Remarks

Based on my experience in teaching English, I noticed that after a short period of time students tend to become easily bored with this subject. As a result of the usual routine of using rigid papers and textbooks, learners become reluctant towards their L2. Therefore, many teachers including myself barely keep students on track by providing them with online material to supplement papers and textbooks, and that was the goal of this experiment. The supplementary material in this project was created on Edmodo to fill students' needs through generating activities that concentrate on a specific unit. After the introduction of the study goal, some students showed a kind of rejection to the experiment, as they were worried of ending up doing extra work without getting any benefit, i.e. extra marks. But later on in the course, they discovered that it was quite fun, interesting, and motivating. They even requested more activities on Edmodo (Figure 5). Ultimately, it was noticed that students had been given more freedom for online exchange of opinions and self-expression using L2, and with less inhibition.

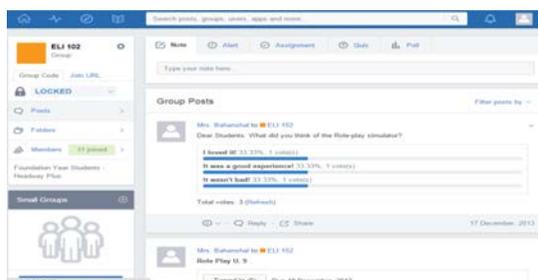


Figure 5: Students' respond to Edmodo

A few students however, continued to resist using the program and I thought that they could be the type of students who either do not like working with technology or do not have a knack for it. But then, I found out that they have no internet connection at home and they did not want anyone, especially their classmates, to know that. To solve this problem, those students were encouraged to come 15 minutes earlier to class and do whatever assignments they were given. In short, I could say that the influence of the implemented method on learning and teaching was evident. The positive impact this new method had did not only reflect students' learning outcome but also sparked their attitude towards online learning as well.

Based on the remarks of both teachers, we can say that Edmodo is rapidly growing and its unarguable benefit will guarantee it a leading role in

the teaching and learning process. Realizing its importance, there is a need to broaden our thoughts of what technology can do to the learning process in general and to our L2 learners in particular, in view of the benefit that it could provide for our students. Considering the fact that students' grades and most importantly their attitudes had improved after the use of Edmodo, we can say that this e-learning platform can have a great role in assessing and targeting the needs of all students especially the weak, shy and reluctant ones.

Looking at the data generated from both approaches, it can be seen that foundation year students have shown a considerable rate of adaptability and approbation to the implemented form of technology. Therefore, we recommend a slow and yet steady change to the traditional L2 classroom, allowing an advanced and increased usage of technology; namely Edmodo which is believed to add great value to the L2 experience.

Implication

Due to the nature of foundation/preparatory year programs, English language courses are modular based. This case study took place over a period of seven weeks only. Therefore, online interaction between the students and their teacher was limited to the module time frame. Once the module was over, these students were placed in new sections with different students and teachers, as is the procedure in this foundation year program. The Edmodo website however, allowed students to access their English class though they were unable to see each other face-to-face, allowing them to benefit from the learning resources provided by their previous teacher.

Even though, the study findings proved the effectiveness of Edmodo on EFL learning and teaching, the results of this study cannot be generalized due to small sample size and time limitation. Yet, there is still more research required to be done in this relatively new field, in order to explore the effectiveness of this technological approach in Saudi Arabian context in particular, and in other situations where English is learnt and used as a foreign language. Practical and influential results are ought to be drawn from studies with more students of different levels of English proficiency.

Conclusion

Through this research, an opportunity was created, whereby students could communicate online and interact in the target language (TL). High percentages of interaction and the frequent postings and replies on Edmodo, which was all conducted in the TL outside of the classroom, have shown that such platform can be a useful and practical way of increasing students' opportunity to engage in the TL.

Being accessible through the smart phone app, Edmodo, not only facilitated a blended learning approach but a mobile learning approach as well. Considering the realities, this paper suggests with special emphasis that EFL in context as Saudi Arabia should be facilitated with new teaching approach, like Edmodo, that will eventually prompt students' learning.

Almost all study participants held positive attitudes towards the use of Edmodo. Thus, a positive correlation between students' English proficiency and the employment of Edmodo has been witnessed. In terms of the effectiveness of Edmodo on learning and motivation, students' interaction on Edmodo had proven that they were motivated enough to use the TL outside of the classroom. As for classroom dynamics, students found technology to be an effective tool in helping to improve their TL through the use of the university's language facilities and students' own devices, which made the entire learning experience both productive and enjoyable. The researchers, in wrapping up, recommend the following chain of this technological approach to be highly effective and beneficial for Saudi context, and others with similar one, towards incorporating and improving EFL learning.

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