Integrating an online component using a Computer Mediated Communication System to Enhance the Learning of English Communication Skills

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Abstract

This paper examines a variety of activities used in the online component of an English Communication course taught to exit level students at the Polytechnic of Namibia. The study concentrates on the tasks that were given to students using the computer mediated communication system "Moodle". The tasks under examination were part of the online component of the hybrid course taught in 2005. These tasks related to study material presented in the face-to-face classroom. They involved activities such as practice, revision, reflection, reading, writing, evaluation, collaboration and cooperation, among others. The tasks under investigation show how face-to-face teaching can be supplemented by online activities to enhance learning as well as students' engagement and personal development in the learning process.

1. Introduction

This paper is about the use of "Moodle" as a support system in the teaching and learning of English. It investigates the impact of the virtual learning environment on the students. In particular, the paper illustrates a variety of tasks given to students to motivate them to learn English beyond the face-to-face classroom. The project was part of the hybrid course, in which students participated in four hours of face-to-face lecture and one hour of online learning per week.

In the online component students were given a variety of tasks related to material presented in the face-to-face class with the aim to make a wider range of materials and activities available to students. The tasks involved practice, revision, reflection, reading and writing, evaluation, collaboration, cooperation and others.

The main objective was to encourage independent and collaborative learning, self-reflection in the learning process and promote human interaction online for future professional development. Another objective was to expose students to computer technology used as

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a teaching and learning tool. Furthermore, my interest was in exposing the students to best practices in online teaching and learning used in other internationally recognised institutions. The online environment should encourage independent and collaborative development.

Additionally, the project was carried out in line with recommendation of the Namibian ICT Policy for Education which is concerned with providing clear objectives and basic competences for learners, students, and teachers to achieve key ICT knowledge and skills (ICT Policy for Education, p. 5). Accordingly, the policy recommends that all citizens have access to ICT education and achieve life long learning both within the formal education community, and beyond into the informal education community (ICT Policy for Education, p 17)

Exposing students to a virtual learning environment in formal education proved to be successful. Life long learning requires interest commitment, reflection, independence, interaction, collaboration and cooperation, among others. The objectives regarding access to ICT education and fostering life long learning were achieved by exposing the students to a virtual learning environment, complete meaningful tasks, cooperate, collaborate, share experiences, reflect on their own learning and evaluate peer comments.

2. Background

During the last decade of teaching at the Polytechnic of Namibia, I observed that students' achievements were largely limited to rote learning. In my early years of teaching, one of the challenges I observed was that students largely depended on the materials presented in class and on recommended reading lists. Gradually, adding a variety of practical teaching approaches (audio and visual aids, videos) in the face-to-face class, students' performance improved. Although the variety of teaching practices amplified during the years, I was seeking a tool, which would enhance independence, ownership and self-direction in the learning process by providing a structured, learner-centred, non-threatening learning environment.

The course English Communication Module 6 (ECM 0600) is structured in a manner where four sessions are reserved for face-to-face traditional classroom teaching and one session for practical work, in which students would practice their reading, speaking, listening and writing skills. These practical sessions used to have low attendance rates and were at some stage even done away with as the level of students' commitment to practice did not improve. The introduction of increased continuous assessment in an attempt to improve performance during practical sessions resulted in very limited success. Students would show an improved commitment to productive writing only when it was subject to assessment.

I then arrived at the blended approach with a hybrid course combining computer technology and face-to-face teaching to overcome the challenges of the previous years. It was assumed that this project would foster independent and collaborative learning, reading outside the face-to-face classroom, writing and human interaction online and researching online, which are skills highly demanded in the students' future workplace.

3. Computer Mediated Communication versus Face-to-face

Sorensen (2004) mentions that a number of studies conclude that face-to-face teaching is more conducive to good quality learning than collaborative learning. These studies claim that shortcomings in the technology are the main reason for that. Computer- supported collaborative learning (CSCL) researchers, on the other hand, identified the problem to be the lack of knowing how to "integrate pedagogy, organisation and technology" (Sorensen, 2004:243) and, therefore, interpret CSCL as higher level learning.

Traditionally, face-to-face teaching takes place in a classroom with a black/whiteboard, chairs and desks. Tiffin and Rajasingham (1995) point out that classroom teaching at the tertiary level involves taking a critical approach to knowledge, thus using variations of the classroom for lectures, seminars and tutorials. Communication in a face-to-face classroom takes place directly. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) present a pattern which they call initiate, response and follow-up (IRF), in which teachers initiate questions, responses coming from learners, and follow ups from the teachers. However, this pattern, commonly used in a face-to-face environment, has limitations. The responses cannot come from all learners at the same time (during class period), nor can they choose their own time to answer. On the contrary, an online facilitator, or moderator, can initiate a question or questions to each individual student through a computer mediated communication system, using asynchronous communication, which has clear advantages concerning flexibility over time and place of study (McConnell, 1994; Laurillard, 1994; and O'Malley, 1989). In other words, all students of the class can respond at any convenient time within a given time frame, accessing the system from a place of their choice. Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye & O'Malley (1995) point out that there is growing awareness that computer supported collaborative learning is the key to a higher level quality learning.

Similarly, Bateson (1973) in Sorensen (2004:250) states that the "meta-communicative context is essential in learning, as it is active in forming the communicative message". In addition Engestroem (1987) points out that "reflection over the learning process is essential if the learning is to develop and expand in depth and in width" (in Sorensen 2004:251). The major difference between CMC and face-to- face is that the learner's presence changes. In a face-to-face class he/she physically appears in the classroom, whereas in online learning his/her presence is "confirmed through the action of making a comment" and, therefore, such a written "comment communicates presence and content" (Sorensen, 2004:252).

The English Communication course consisted of a combination of four face-to-face contact hours and one online hour. For this purpose a computer laboratory with 30 computers all having access to the Internet was available for the groups to be used once a week for one hour. It needs to be noted that most students did not have access to the Internet at home or outside scheduled lab hours and therefore it was necessary to arrange laboratory groups. Some activities could be completed in an hour.

The computer mediated communication system "Moodle" was set up with the following folder. Students registered and were given individual passwords and a "key" password to enter the system. On entering "Moodle" the student was taken to a weekly calendar. The calendar contained tasks which led to forums where students could post their messages and upload assignments. A student could read the task by clicking the link "TASK 1", "TASK 2", etc.

Students would meet once a week for one lesson in the computer lab. Students were invited to access the VLE beyond the official "class time", i.e. join other lab classes or access it from outside the institution. The minimum requirement for successful completion of the online class was to complete 7 out of 9 tasks. The individual tasks were not graded.
I took about two weeks (two periods) to register all the students and familiarise them with the system. They were provided with their usernames and passwords. They were also allowed to change their password, if they wished to do so. Then they had to fill in a profile after which they were officially registered for a particular group. Each student had access to the others' profiles which also provided a short description of the individual student.

Throughout the semester several tasks related to subject material taught in the face-to-face class were given. Depending on the task, one or two weeks were allocated to post their messages. As students were new to this way of teaching they were carefully introduced to the system in class.

4. The Project

The three main elements in teaching, which are presentation, practice and production/ performance (Pincas, 2006), are crucial in the quality of the learning outcome. However, the areas of practice and production cannot always sufficiently be dealt with in the face-to-face environment.

The traditional approach of teaching at the Polytechnic of Namibia was to practice in class, assign homework and give tests and assignments to evaluate students' progress. The opportunity to practise the new study material by doing homework was usually not part of the assessment and therefore the success of learning depended primarily on individual student initiative and motivation. I felt that there was a need to motivate students to learn for understanding within the learner-centred pedagogical framework. Therefore, the online component was integrated into the existing face-to-face course.

The practical session of English Communication Module 6 (ECM 0600) was substituted with the online component. The students were divided into groups of 20 – 25 for two main reasons. On the one hand they could benefit from collaborative learning in a medium sized group and on the other hand the availability of accessible computers was limited to about twenty-five. The virtual learning environment of choice was the open source software "Moodle". The tasks given in this online environment were all related to material taught in the face-to-face classes. Feedback on the various online tasks was given to the students regularly in an asynchronous way.

5. Designing tasks

When designing the online component there was a need to carefully think about the needs, objectives and outcomes of the design. Technology and pedagogy had to be combined in a meaningful way (Pincas, Lectures, 2002/3).

Some of the variations of the three Ps (Pincas, 2006, week 2) were applied when integrating the online tasks. However, the main teaching and most of the practice and assessment were still done in the face-to-face classroom. The attempt was to use the pedagogy in such a way that it would make a difference. The online tasks were designed according to the principles of higher level quality learning, and to meaningfully supplement the face-to-face classroom activities. I wanted to provide an opportunity to experience the advantages of online

discussions and CSCL (computer-supported collaborative Learning) one advantage being the ability to repeatedly return to the same classroom and read other students' comments and walk over old ground for revision and reflection purposes.

6. Tasks and findings: A selection of Online Tasks

The online component formed 20% of the entire course with a limited access of one hour available per week. In other words, presentation, practice and performance took place mainly in the face-to-face classroom. The main aim was to encourage meaningful engagement with the material presented as well as to foster reading further. The online component was used for a variety of reasons such as further practice, reflection and exchange of knowledge among the students asynchronously to foster interest in the subject matter dealt with by subjecting the students to a number of different of tasks. In this paper I am not analysing the variations of the three Ps in the face-to-face class. I refer to the study material dealt with in class as presentation.

The examples presented in this study demonstrate how interaction in the virtual learning environment takes place. As opposed to interaction in the face-to face classroom, Sorensen (2004) states that the online learner cannot make a comment without being asked to reflect at a meta-level about the content of his/her comment.

In a more practical fashion, Pincas (2006, week 4) suggests the following variety of tasks:

- Brief discursive
- Comprehension
- Interpretation
- Sharing of experience
- Giving opinion
- Exercise

6.1 Task 1: Introduction, share experience and expectations

The first week was structured around getting the learners attention and creating a non-threatening learning environment. Gagne (1965) proposes that gaining the learners' conditions for instruction attention is a critical event in providing optimal conditions for instruction. Young adults are generally keen on new technology, therefore being able to have access to a computer and use it for learning/in class proved to be a great motivator from the beginning.

Gravett (2001) encourages exploring the adult learner's knowledge, as she claims it leads to promoting meaningful learning. By asking the learner to share his/her previous knowledge which is related to the content of the course material, the existing knowledge is "lifted to the conscious level", and, consequently, "serves as an interpretative framework for learning" (Gravett, 2001: 14).

The first task was to introduce themselves to the group, mention the title of their favourite movie, name two things which they knew how to do well on the computer (existing knowledge), name two things which they expect from the online section of the course (linking new content to existing knowledge).

There was a positive attitude from the beginning and students showed excitement and motivation in fulfilling their first tasks and reading their colleagues' postings. They were able to go back and forth as many times as they wanted to. I, as the moderator, was able to make conclusions in terms of instructional design of further tasks from their postings with regard to their existing knowledge. Their expectations of the online component related mainly to the mastering of the content of the course material rather than expecting to learn something about online learning.

6.2 Task 2: Read, Reflect, Comment and Suggest

The table below shows the order of the three Ps used in this activity. It points out which part was done in the face-to-face class and the online component.

Topic Meetings	Presentation/ practice	Practice Online activity: Review and reflect critically on content and own knowledge - comment	Performance Test/assignment in Face-to-face class (assessed)

This unit dealt with meeting procedure, duties of the chairperson, secretary and members and meeting documentation (notice, agenda, minutes).

The fact that time and access were limited to one hour per week resulted in formulating one straightforward discussion question for all students of that particular group. In this case they were asked to identify the most difficult part/s in the unit and comment on how they intended to master it. They were also asked to comment on one other student's posting. This online task involved a number of activities such as reading and revising the content material presented in class, reflecting one's knowledge critically, commenting and making a constructive suggestion with the aim of creating the individual student's awareness of his/her state of development within the learning process.

The objective was to make the students go over the content material to see the big picture as recommended by Brooks and Brooks (1993:46) who point out how " piecemeal teaching actually inhibits meaningful learning" in traditional teaching methods. This task also aimed at creating the awareness of the range of the content with the view to constructively take steps to master it. As Leamnson (1999, in Gravett, 2001:116) claims, making the students write down or verbalise their thoughts about what they are learning leads the brain to produce "firm verbalised ideas".

The postings varied. Most students realised that writing minutes was one of the greatest challenges whereas the duties of the chairperson, members and secretary were already acquired knowledge at that stage. Reading and commenting on their colleagues' postings created awareness of similarities and differences of individual learners and their stages of development within the learning process.

6.3 Task 3: Search, Read, Select and Apply

Topic	Presentation	Practice	Performance
Arguments and Fallacies	Theory in face-to-face class	Research and practice application online	Test in face-to-face class

This unit dealt with arguments and fallacies. It is an introduction to critical thinking. Some of the objectives of the unit are to know a number of different types of fallacies, identify a fallacious argument, analyse it and comment on it. There are well over on hundred fallacies, but it is impossible to teach them all in detail in a face-to-face classroom situation. This means that students had to do independent reading.

Another aim was to move the students from rote learning to meaningful learning. Isolated and memorised pieces of information tend to be forgotten soon as they are not placed in a meaningful organised structure in the brain (Resnick, 1989). Learning for understanding is meaningful and therefore needed for "insight and for the lively and flexible use of knowledge" (Perkins 2002:5). The task of selecting a fallacy from a long list of choices offered the students a chance to choose those which are meaningful for them rather than making them memorise the moderator's/teacher's choice.

The task was to visit a website on fallacies, read and study some unknown fallacies. They were asked to select one fallacy or two fallacies which were not presented in class. The final activity was to explain the selected fallacies in their own words and provide their own examples. Again, they had to comment on other students' postings.

Almost all the students managed to read for at least 30 minutes, selected a fallacy and produced an example from their own experience. There were very few repetitions (students choosing the same fallacy) and misunderstandings. They started to show great interest in "googling" additional information.

6.4 Task 4: Explore, Experiment, Practice, Create

Topic	Practice	Presentation	Performance
Power point slide show	Online activity: Practice, explore and experiment creating a PP slide show	Took place in the computer lab, if students needed further help	Group activity: Students created their own PP slide show for presentation in class

According to Vella (1994a) adult learners want to experience the immediate usefulness and relevance of new learning. They are more likely to be motivated to learn when the "learning content is relevant and beneficial to their life situation" (Gravett, 2001:15). Students were given the steps to follow and practice creating their own Power Point slides. Students were encouraged to experiment with a variety of functions such as slide design (background), layout, animation scheme, colour scheme and creating a bar graph or pie chart.

Instead of teaching them about Power Point in the face-to-face classroom, the students were taken to the computer lab to explore and experiment with the programme directly. The "learning by doing" approach allowed them to go through the various steps repeatedly and familiarise themselves with the programme until they felt confident using it. Moreover, they enjoyed trying out the different designs and layout, the colour and animation schemes. And as a result, they needed little help when creating their own slide show for the group presentation.

6.5 Task 5: Reflect, Evaluate and Suggest

Topic	Presentation/practice	Performance	Practice
	Preparation and theory in face-to-face class	presentation in face-to-face class (assessed)	Reflect on your experience, comment

This reflection task is also called a summary or recapitulation task as it encourages the learner to think deeply about what he/she has learned and can be used at the end of a learning session (Gravett, 2001).
This "round off" task for that week was a reflection task combined with evaluation and suggestion for future improvement. The students were asked to reflect on and evaluate their performance during the presentation. They had to think and write about the most difficult part and the easiest one. They were asked to make suggestions in terms of improving their future performance when giving a talk.

The students gave honest comments concerning their areas of strengths and weaknesses in using Information Technology in the learning of English at this stage.

6.6 Task 6: Search, Evaluate and Comment

Topic	Presentation/ practice	Practice	Performance
Persuasive letters AIDA principles	Face-to-face class	Research and comment online	Test in f2f class(assessed)

The World Wide Web can be a tremendous pool of resources, or as Sangster (1995, in The WWW: Its uses as a teaching tool) puts it "the library on your desktop". Learning to navigate the Web is imperative in today's world as it "helps provide cross pathways movement" (Whalley, 1995, in The World-wide Web: Its Uses as a Teaching Tool) unlike books.

This online task involved searching for a website on persuasive writing and evaluating it in terms of usability (how useful the information is with regard to preparing for the exam). The students had to comment on the usefulness of the particular website using evaluation criteria such as accuracy, authority, currency, creativity, and others.

The following example was a typical WWW research activity, which, at the same time, demonstrates the nature of dialogue teaching, according to which the learner becomes the

subject and decision-maker (Vella, 1994a). In this situation the learner becomes a co-teacher and the teacher becomes a co-learner. Both teacher and learner participate in the learning process.

The students participated actively in the learning process, as they were searching for information and evaluating it. The moderator, on the other hand, learned about new, useful sites through her students.

6.7 Task 7: Imagine and Apply

Topic	Presentation	Practice	Performance
Case studies	Theory in face-to-face class	Practice application of theory online	Test (assessed)

Students were asked to imagine a problem situation in their future workplace (the issue had to be related to their field of study) and explain how they would solve it using the seven-step-problem-solving model presented in class. They had to demonstrate the application of the seven-step-problem-solving model in an imagined working life situation.

This type of task takes the adult learner straight into a relevant real life situation. Garvett (2001:15) recommends that learners should be "invited to indicate how new learning can be applied". Students' postings suggested that the majority had understood and were able to apply the concept.

6.8 Task 8: Self test, Report and Synthesise

Topic	Presentation/practice	Practice	Performance
	In ace-to-face class	Online task to apply learned material, comment	Test (assessed)

This task investigated application of previous and newly acquired knowledge.
It consisted of three components. The students were asked to do a self test of what type of negotiators they were. Most students turned out to be creative negotiators. They generally expressed goodwill and were willing to make concessions.

6.9 Task 9: Reflect, Select and Give Advice

At the end of the course, students were asked to give a brief comment on the online component of the course, mentioning the good and bad about it and giving careful advice to the participants of the succeeding group. This reflection task proved to be very useful for the group of students of the following semester. It was posted for them to read before they started the course. Some practical advice was given on the issues of password, time management, and the usefulness of the online component.

7. The Impact of the Online Component on the Learners

The online component was well-received by the students from the beginning. Having the opportunity to learn via computer technology turned out to be the biggest motivator. It was observed that the learners gained a better understanding of their own learning by further exchanging and revising knowledge in the online forums. The e-activities enabled students to access and evaluate information on the World Wide Web, thus enhancing their reading skills. Compared to the traditional practice sessions, the students demonstrated increased commitment and independence. They were able to effectively practice computer skills acquired at an earlier stage or during the course. They developed self-reflection skills in their own learning and peer-to-peer evaluation skills. The most impressive observation was to see how computer-mediated communication increased participation throughout the entire course.

8. Limitations and Suggestions for the Way Forward

The most strenuous limitation was access. The computer lab was officially made available for one session per week per group. Students who had missed a session could either complete the task in the following session, join one of the other groups, or, alternatively access the system from outside the institution. With a requirement of completing most of the tasks, students had to be highly committed. Unforeseen technical problems, such as downloading or a site not being available, added to the limitations and delay of delivery of tasks.

Unfortunately, the lab was not made available for student use throughout the day. Generally, most students proved to be committed and eager to complete the tasks. However, I observed interest to use the lab frequently beyond allocated class time to do research, spend more time on the tasks, or even to do research and/or assignments given by other lecturers. There is an urgent need to make computer labs more widely available to all students at the institution, as most households do not commonly have a computer with access to the Internet.

The issue of availability of computer labs has been raised repeatedly within the department and will have to be addressed. The access to computer technology will further have implications on the staff. Ideally, the lab should be made available for students throughout teaching hours and possibly evening hours, for research and typing of assignment purposes.

Taking into consideration the positive response of the students, it is recommended that the online component be extended to expose students to more advanced possibilities of online education. Here are some suggestions for an extended hybrid version:

- upload additional material/exercises
- show a video
- provide audio activity
- provide a chat session for a particular exercise
- more time for online research
- add a virtual common room (cafeteria)
- let students create blogs
- possible discussion with student group from another institution
- extend the computer lab sessions to two hours per week, possibly one fixed and one flexible one

In fact, a purely online course for this subject can be developed in the near future, provided access is available for all students.

9. Conclusion

This paper touched on some of the issues regarding integrating computer mediated communication into teaching and learning. The issues ranged from a description of the project and the computer mediated communication system used, to online tasks and the impact of computer technology on the students with regard to preparing them for future professional development and life long learning. The paper presented brief descriptions of a variety of online tasks which were designed to meaningfully supplement face-to-face teaching by engaging students in further reading, practice, reflecting on content, sharing experience, evaluating, and collaborative learning. The tasks demonstrated how the interaction and learning in a virtual environment differs from face-to-face classroom situation. The use and access of technology turned out to be a major motivator for learning. The online component was received with great enthusiasm by students who appreciated the fact that they were able to use and expand their ICT skills in meaningful and holistic contexts.

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