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Effective Use of MOODLE in ELT Settings : An Application in SELI at Özyeğin University

Mahir Sarıgül
School of English Language Instruction (SELI)
Özyeğin University, Istanbul, Turkey
mahir.sarigul@ozyegin.edu.tr

Abstract: *Technology in language teaching has been around for longer than one could imagine and the use of tape recorders, language laboratories and video in the classroom in 1960s and 1970s (Dudeney and Hockly, 2007: 7) has recently gained a new dimension with the widespread use of Internet since 1990s. All teachers, from the most traditional to the most innovative are already beginning to find uses for the Net in their teaching due to the fact that, by its very nature as a tool for communication, the Net does lend itself particularly to communicative and task-based learning, so a teacher is not only a teacher in the classroom, but also a facilitator and an Internet guide (Teeler and Gray, 2000: 59). MOODLE , a free online dynamic learning environment, offers a myriad of opportunities in language classrooms from setting up Forums to Video Recording Assignment. This presentation aims to introduce how Extensive Reading tasks that were used to develop learners' reading skills and writing skills have been employed to improve their speaking skills in the School of English Language Instruction (SELI) at Özyeğin University, a newly founded, third generation university with high aspirations for the future.*

Keywords: MOODLE, CMS, ELT, ER, GRVP

Introduction

Reading is an exercise dominated by the eyes and the brain, in which the eyes receive messages and the brain then has to work out the significance of these messages (Harmer, 1988: 153) and just like listening, reading is regarded as a "receptive skill" while speaking and writing are "productive skills", meaning the reader or listener receives information but does not produce it (Scrivener, 1994: 20).

Extensive reading (ER) in English Language Teaching (ELT) means reading texts such as graded readers outside the class on a regular basis – one or two a week throughout a module, course or a semester depending on the nature of the language training. Through such an activity, students are expected to be exposed to more comprehensible input based on the reading hypothesis (Krashen, 1993. In Yamashita, 2008: 662) postulating the facilitative effect of ER on various abilities/skills such as reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling (Yamashita, 2008: 662). It is also regarded that learners getting immersed in meaningful texts such as those in the fiction genres of adventure, detection and mystery, romance, and human interest is possibly the best means by which students can develop confidence and fluency in reading long texts (Brown, 2000) provided that these readers are apt to their levels, i.e., easy enough for them to understand without using a dictionary. It is also important that students doing ER should be free from any big exam or test stress and should get pleasure from what they read while being assessed or measured by using a follow-up task such as writing a simple book report or presenting it orally through video recording and uploading it onto MOODLE. The latter is the method I have been using in School of English Language Instruction (SELI) at Özyeğin University to help students improve their speaking skills which will later be supporting their presentation skills in both higher levels and undergraduate classes.

Extensive Reading : An Overview

Extensive reading as a means of facilitating acquisition among the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students has been revisited by an increasing number of language instructors recently and learners in such programs typically select books from a wide variety of genres and language levels and read for information and enjoyment, with the primary goal of achieving a general, overall understanding of the reading material (Ono, Day & Harcsh, 2004: 12; Schmidt, 2007).

An extensive reading approach is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: 193). As this definition implies, extensive reading also pays off in increased general second / [foreign] language competence (Richards, 2005: 6) and longer concentrated periods of silent reading build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation (Grabe, 1991: 396. In Richards, 2005:6). At this point, what is of vital importance is the teacher's role as a guide to lead their students to choosing the right reading material since reading should not be a "pain" but a "gain". Therefore, it is very important for students to pick up books that they can read quickly and easily, through which their confidence will increase and they become more comfortable with the process of reading in the foreign language (Ono, Day & Harsch, 2004: 13). Besides having some benefits such as helping the EFL learners read faster and understand more, increase vocabulary range, recognize a use of variety of grammatical patterns, and help improve their writing proficiency or more importantly oral fluency. Traditionally, follow-up activities for ER end up with a writing activity, in which the students present a written "Book Report" (Schmidt, 2007) or "Extensive Reading Log" (See Ono, Day & Harsch. 2004) where they log in their comments, impressions, or ratings about the book, so the emphasis is on developing students' writing skills. However, likewise, extensive reading can be utilized to improve students' oral skills. In either case, assessment should not be the main issue since fear of being tested or examined may adversely affect student motivation to do such pleasure reading. Therefore, alternative assessment methods are the best way to measure how much they are getting out of their readers. Particularly, in the case that students' speaking skills should improve, there are various methods such as doing a simple conversation with the student about the book during the tutorial hours or making a brief presentation to the class – not all of the students but randomly chosen ones each time.

Using Graded Readers Through MOODLE video component

The Need

Students in SELI are immersed in an intensive one-year English language teaching program which consists of five level – elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced and depending on their level as part of the assessment they are expected to do various assignments based on the Learning Portfolio tasks such as reading a graded reader and doing a presentation about it; starting a search on the net finding an academic article and a podcast to read and listen; then based on them, preparing an individual oral presentation, writing an essay and doing an interactive discussion in groups in the class. Both individual oral presentations and interactive discussions are video-taped to be later evaluated by their instructors teaching that specific level. However, most students having no previous experience in terms of speaking in front of an audience and a video camera, they have less self-confidence and suffer from stage fright not to mention the fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation problems. So extensive reading, besides helping and supporting the students to improve their skills in reading, comprehension, vocabulary and grammar, it could also help them overcome fluency and pronunciation problems and to a certain extent, their stage fright.

The Method

Since students at Özyeğin University are provided with laptops and have high speed wireless internet connection at school or in the dormitories, most of the course materials and other tasks can be done via Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) or Course Management System (CMS) online. As part of the Learning Portfolio students – in this application intermediate students – are expected to do an individual oral presentation and an interactive discussion in groups in front their instructor and classmates and a camera through which their presentations are recorded. However, speaking is usually the least developed skill of the four skills in EFL due to the fact they live in an environment where there is not much possibility to use or practice the language. As a teacher who believes that reading definitely enhances one's language skills in many ways and who used to ask his students to read a number of graded readers and have them write a brief book report based on a task sheet, I thought I could use the video component of MOODLE as a means to improve their fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, use of speaking strategies as well as helping them overcome their stage fright to a certain extent. To this end, the following procedure has been observed:

a) The instructor, by using the video component of MOODLE, uploads a Graded Reader Video Presentation (GRVP) task with a deadline,
b) Instructor also embeds a task sheet explaining what to do in detail in the video assignment (see Appendix A),
c) Instructor prepares a feedback sheet to be used during the tutorials,
d) Students are asked to choose a graded reader available in the library and read it within the allocated time (usually a week and a half depending on the weekly workload),
e) Students upload their presentation using their built-in web-cam in their laptops and an outside microphone,
f) Students are strongly recommended that they should rehearse the video recording until they get the best result, paying attention to the light, image and sound quality,
g) After the recording is done and uploaded onto the MOODLE, students are required to sign up for a tutorial (which is also done online and set by the instructor) so that they could get feedback on their GRVP,
h) During the tutorial, instructor comments on aspects like grammar, pronunciation, voice, intonation vocabulary usage, speaking strategies, and so on.
i) Students are told that their recording will neither be viewed by their classmates nor shared with any third parties unless they consent to. Thus, their privacy will be kept.

Problems Encountered and Troubleshooting

At first there was this usual resistance from the students due to their lack of interest in reading even in L1 (in Turkish) let alone in a foreign/second language. A majority of students – more than 60% of them – said they had no done any regular reading in L1 and/or developed a reading habit. Secondly, few of them who had done some extensive reading back in their high school education complained that either the books were so difficult to understand with a lot of vocabulary or the content was so boring that they gave up reading. Finally, they claimed that the program in SELI was so overloaded that they could hardly find time to read a book.

To these complaints I have listed the following counter arguments:

a) ER will help them read faster and understand more; increase their confidence in their reading; increase their vocabulary knowledge, reinforce and strengthen their grammatical knowledge; help improve their writing proficiency and oral fluency (Ono, Day & Harsch, 2004: 13).
b) They are free to choose any graded reader from the library, which will allow them to make a choice appropriate to their taste and field of interest.
c) There is no page limit to the books they are going to read.
d) The deadline for each reader will be long enough (a week and a half on average) so that they will no have to squeeze it to the last minute.
e) GRVPs will not be assessed, however, they will affect their Class Participation Grades (CPG positively.

So the students agreed to do it and in each 8-week course I have taught since Spring term of 2009, they read 3-4 books and uploaded the video recording of their presentations of the books on the MOODLE through which gave them feedback on their performances. At the end of each course, I asked them how they felt about GRVPs and ER and below are some of the common or similar comments they have made throughout the courses I have taught so far:

a) "I have enjoyed reading to my taste and in the field of my interest and thus broadened my horizons no to mention the new words and expressions I have learned."

b) "Seeing some words and structures used in a different way surprised me and helped me look at the language from a different perspective."

c) "Before submitting my final recording, I did at least ten rehearsals. Each time something went wrong. Sometimes the light was not good and I didn't like the image. Sometimes I made too many mistakes while speaking and sometimes my voice was not good. However, each time I became more ambitious to do it perfectly and I did!"

d) "The best and the most useful thing about this course was the GRVP. I hope this will continue in the upper levels."

e) "I have never liked reading and I still don't. But I had to do it because I didn't want my CPG to go down."

f) "Although speaking to web-cam and a mic is not the same as speaking in front of an audience and a video camera in the class, GRVPs at least helped me to view myself, my mimics and body gestures. It's quite funny and sometimes you're like, 'Hey, how on earth I've made such a silly mistake!'

g) "To tell you the truth, I had never read a book in English or Turkish except course books until I came to this university. I was so busy with SBS, ÖSS and all. Furthermore, chatting and sending SMS was easier and more interesting than reading. I understand reading is important and I can say that I've enjoyed it, but more importantly video-recording part is great!"

h) "I don't know how, but I've realized that I began to use some words and expressions from the books in my writings. I'm feeling more confident in writing."

It is obvious that GRVP has created a positive attitude towards reading as well as speaking and even writing with the majority of the students in the class. At this point, after a careful examination of the above-mentioned comments, first language reading attitudes are of greater importance and "students with positive attitudes toward reading in their own language are likely to begin with a positive attitude toward second language reading; students for whom first language reading is less attractive or important will come to second language reading with less than positive, or even negative, attitudes" (Richards, 2005: 23). However, this should not drive instructors into despair since even the students who already have poor attitudes towards reading are likely to change their attitudes because, as Richards (2005: 22) states, "they are subject to change – they are not set in concrete."

Conclusion

Davis (1995: 335) states, "Any ESL, EFL, or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present." So extensive reading has recently been revisited by most language instructors and researchers as a means to develop learners' reading skills as well as their vocabulary, grammar and writing and even oral skills. However, as the world is turning into a global village and the use of ICT (Information and CommunicationTechnologies) such as computers, internet and mobile communication has been widespread , language learning processes are also changing and the use of technology in and outside the classroom is becoming increasingly important, and "it will become a normal part of ELT practices in the coming years" (Dudeney and Hockly, 2007: 7). So technology particularly the Internet provides us with a myriad of opportunities for materials and softwares to be incorporated in language learning and MOODLE is just one of them which can be utilized in many ways starting from setting up Forums to doing various language skills tasks such as reading, writing, listening and the last but not the least, speaking which is of primary importance in developing effective communication. Applications such as GRVP are, then, only a "small step" in technology blended learning environment but they are an "important leap" to raise awareness in the world of digital immigrants.

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Appendix A

Özyeğin University

School of English Language Instruction (SELI)

Graded Reader Video Presentation (GRVP) Task Sheet

Intermediate (2010 – Fall)

This task includes three main steps and each step should not take more than the specified time allocated.

STEP 1 (1 min.)

a. Greet your teacher and friends (Good Morning, Good Evening, Good Afternoon, etc. depending on the time of day you have recorded.) and tell them that you are going to introduce a book to them.

b. Talk about the name of the book, the author, publishing year and company, the number of pages and the level of the book.

STEP 2 (1-2 mins)

a. Tell about the characters in the book. Who is the main character / hero ? What is he/she like (his/her physical and personality traits and clothing,etc.) The character's description usually says something about the character.

b. Also tell about the other characters briefly in the same way as this will help your audience understand the book better.

c. Give a brief summary of the plot [the main events in the story (Where and When does the story take place ? Century, year, month, past, future, if any)]

d. While talking use at least three new words or expressions that you have learned from the book and put emphasis on them.

STEP 3 (1-2 mins.)

a. Talk about your overall impression about the book. Did you like it? Is it easy / difficult to read or is it absorbing (fast-moving). Why do you (not) recommend it ?

b. Closing remarks (Thank your audience and say 'good-bye').

Total Time : 5-7 mins.

KEY LANGUAGE

I think...
I believe that...
In my opinion...
I feel that....
If you ask me, ...
Well, as I see it, ...
As far as I'm concerned...
I would like to add that...
That's why I feel that...
What I'm trying to say is....

Appendix B

FEEDBACK SHEET

Graded Readed Video Presentation (GRVP)

Student Name: Class:

Grammar	
Vocabulary	
Pronunciation	
Use of Key Language	
Instructor's overall comment on the student's performance (narration, voice, gestures & mimics, etc.)	

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