Improve English Communication Skills by Using E-Learning

[1]Songsak Promdee and [2]Phramaha Santhat Pongsawat

Faculty of Religion and Philosophy, Mahamakut Buddhist University.
Faculty of Education, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.
[1]Email: Muayryyyyy56@gmail.com, [2] weerapong.pae@mcu.ac.th

Abstract

The report presents the improve English communication skills by using e-learning. Over the past few decades, there have been tremendous increase in technology advancement and the significance of this in the field of education cannot be over emphasized. The adoption and use of E-learning in studying EFL, in particular, is one such areas that has experienced such fast-paced development for some time now. As a result, the government all over the world are committing a lot of resources to keep up with this technology advancement. In this light, the government of Saudi Arabia through its Ministry of Education has recently made commitment, both as the practical and policy levels, with the hope to also benefit from using E-learning in studying EFL in Saudi Schools. However, little is known about the perception of students and teachers regarding the role of E-learning is studying EFL in the Saudi context. In an attempt to contribute to this research base, this paper draws on an empirical investigation using group interviews with students and teachers in order to gain insight into their perception about the role of E-learning in studying EFL in Saudi Arabia. The findings are presented and discussed in four thematic areas: promoting key learning skills, independent learning, flexible learning and interactive learning. The paper also highlights the limitations of the research and concludes by making a number of recommendations.

Keywords: English Communication; E-Learning

Introduction

Increasing EFL students' language skills and independent learning are issues of paramount concern because the contact hours in traditional face to face classes are not enough to help students develop their language skills. The E-Learning Moodle is an interactive tool that could be used to address this issue, as it could activate and increase EFL students' language skills as they are exposed to the language outside the classroom and work independently on improving their language skills.

In Thailand, e-learning is considered as a new way of learning. Beamish et al. (2002:42) described the process of e-learning as a set of processes and applications that relates to learning and training through computer-based, online, virtual classrooms, and other digital collaboration learning. Homan and Macpherson (2005:97), meanwhile, defined e-learning as the

learning that involves electronic learning materials, intranet/internet networking systems in learning, as well as those with interactive and downloadable materials. According to Hall and Snider (2000:35), e-learning is further explained as the learning process taking place over electronic devices over intranet or internet. In this study, e-learning is determined as the process of interactive learning with real time responses in learning activities between teachers and students over the internet.

In the context of Thai society, there are many reasons, according to Jamlan (2004:95), Thais should adopt and implement e-learning for English. First, e-learning has become an ideal engine for driving the expansion of learning and education in response to the rapid growth of information technologies. Second, e-learning offers rich information for both students and teachers for access anytime and anywhere. Third, e-learning can be promoted as alternative learning that can reach those previously denied access such as students with disabilities and limitations. Finally, e-Learning can change the traditional educational system where almost all learning processes are made in a classroom, and thus it can better utilize the valuable resources and expand high quality of learning to a larger number of students. In addition, Zhang et al. (2004:52) argued that the major advantages of e-learning are that it contributes to the creation of student centered and self-paced learning, flexibility in terms of location and time, it is potentially available to distance learners, it is a cost-effective learning method, it provides unlimited access to knowledge, and the encouragement of knowledge transfer and sharing. Further, Newton (2003:42) mentioned that e-learning can contribute to the development and improvement of accessibility to training and education, and the improvement of learning and teaching quality, in which the adoption of e-learning will offer the educational institutions strategic opportunities for entering the new area of education, particularly in non-formal ways such as distance learning and life-long education.

1. E-Learning

According to Spender (2001:87), e-learning is an innovative way of delivering knowledge, which in turn offers students more control over the process of learning. Beamish et al. (2002:95) described the process of e-learning as a set of processes and applications that are related to learning and training through computer-based, online, virtual classrooms, and other digital collaboration learning. Homan and Macpherson (2005:38) defined e-learning as the learning that is involved with electronic learning materials, intranet/internet networking systems in learning, as well as those with interactive and downloadable materials. Meanwhile, Hall and Snider (2000:45) explained e-learning as the learning process over electronic devices over the intranet or internet. In this study, e-learning is determined as the process of interactive learning with a real time response in learning activities between teachers and students over the internet, in which the e-learning for learning English language focuses on the services provided by online private English teaching schools in Thailand.

There are several reasons for the adoption of e-learning, according to Jamlan (2004:38). As suggested by Jamlan (2004:52), e-learning has become an ideal engine for driving the expansion of learning and education in response to the rapid growth of information technologies. It also offers rich information for both students and teachers for access anytime and anywhere (Jamlan, 2004:53). E-learning can be promoted as alternative learning that can reach those previously denied access such as students with disabilities and limitations. Further, Jamlan (2004:55) stated that e-learning can change the traditional educational system where almost all learning processes are made in a classroom, and thus it can better utilize the valuable resources and expand the high quality of learning to a larger number of students.

Zhang et al. (2004:132) argued that the major advantages of e-learning are that it contributes to the creation of student centered and self-paced learning, flexibility in terms of location and time, it is potentially available to distance learners, it is a cost effective learning method, it provides unlimited access to knowledge, and the encouragement of knowledge transfer and sharing. Further, Newton (2003:94) mentioned that e-learning can contribute to the development and improvement of access to training and education, and the improvement of learning and teaching quality, in which the adoption of e-learning will offer educational institutions strategic opportunities for entering a new area of education, particularly in non-formal ways such as distance learning and lifelong education. On the other side, Zhang et al. (2004:134) argued that there are disadvantages associated with e-learning, which are the lack of immediate response in asynchronous e-learning, potentially more anxiety, confusion and frustration, and that it is not appropriate for some people. According to Hebel (2004:55), e-learning could lead to information overload, too many observers but not participants, and difficulties in encouraging senior people to get involved.

Decebo (2014:47) mentioned that Asia is the region with the strongest growth of eLearning, in which the revenues from e-learning services had reached more than $5 billion in 2011 and are expected to reach about $11.5 billion by 2016. As suggested by Decebo (2014:48), the market was fueled by the governments' initiatives for promoting e-learning in response to the rapid growth of information technologies, the shortage of quality education, as well as affordability and convenience factors. In Thailand, English is undeniably the dominant international language, in which the extraordinarily widespread use of daily international communication after the implementation of AEC means that English as the dominant language at present is going to be used on a much more universal and widespread scale than ever before. Given the dominant position of English, the adoption of online English conversation programs will further help the country for the improvement of people's international language skills in an efficient and effective manner.

2. Types of E-Learning

The literature acknowledges five types of e-learning. The five categories are e-learning that is learner-led, instructor-led, embedded, facilitated, and telementored (Horton & Horton,

2003; Ilie & Pavel, 2006; Kokkosis, Charitopoulos, Prekas, & Athanasopoulou, 2006; Gulbahar, 2009). While Learner-led e-learning provides course material to students (Horton, 2006 as cited in Esgi, 2013), facilitated e-learning allows student discussion via Forums and Chats that are related to an assignment (Ilie & Pavel, 2006:24). As for embedded e-learning, it is when teachers embed videos and web pages to enhance students' learning. The latter is different from instructorled e-learning which consists of instructors' presentations via real-time webcast technology which could include audio and video conferences, speaking, screen sharing and whiteboard applications. Students' direct participation here is via audio, video or instant messages (Ruiz J.G.; Mintzer M.J.; Leipzig 2006 as cited in Esgi, 2013). Last but not least is the telementored e-learning which involves a combination of distance learning and the use of technology. For example, students are given printed material, and then instructors provide them with extra guidance and information about this material via video conferences, instant messages and internet phones (Gulbahar, 2009:84). E-Learning in this paper refers to the E-Learning Moodle. The word MOODLE "was originally an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment" (Nedeva & Dimova, 2010:51). It includes a mixture of learner-led, facilitated and embedded types of E-Learning as will be explained below in the components of the E-learning Moodle.

3. The Components of the E-Learning Moodle and Their Effect on Language Proficiency and Independent Learning

The E-learning Moodle has two main components, namely activities and resources. The activities include assignment, chat, choice, Database, External Tool, Forum, Glossary, Hotpot, lesson, Quiz, SCORM Package, Survey, Wiki, and Workshop. The following is a brief explanation of each activity and resource component according to the British University of Egypt's (BUE) E-Learning Moodle:

3.1 E-Learning Activities

The following E-learning activities could be used to enhance students' language proficiency and independent learning as will be explained at the end of each activity.

Chat: The chat activity module enables participants to have text-based, real-time synchronous discussions. These discussions develop students' fluency and are a springboard for exchanging ideas and experiences. Thus, students' independent learning develops as they are engaged in acquiring information from others without the help or intrusion of instructors.

Choice: The choice activity module enables a teacher to ask a single question and offer a selection of possible responses. It is useful when teachers want to stimulate students' thinking via a poll or would like to test their understanding. This again allows them to use the language and to be exposed to their peers' views through votes. Independent learning here is acquired through students' accessing these polls and being able to analyse their results outside class whenever it is convenient and at their own pace.

Database: The database activity module enables participants to create, maintain and search a collection of entries (i.e. records). The structure of the entries is defined by the teacher as a number of fields. Field types include checkbox, radio buttons, dropdown menu, text area, URL, picture and uploaded file. Students could gain information via different means that could tailor for different learning styles. By reading text their vocabulary and grammar improves and while listening to audio material their pronunciation develops. The database material could be accessed at any time according to the students' preferences which encourages independent learning.

External Tool: The external tool activity module enables students to interact with learning resources and activities on other web sites. For example, an external tool could provide access to a new activity type or learning materials from a publisher. This interaction has a positive effect on students' language skills as it makes them read the available resources independently.

Forum: The forum activity module enables participants to have asynchronous discussions i.e. discussions that take place over an extended period of time. The Forum effect is similar to the Chat in its allowing students to share and exchange their ideas and experiences independently, with or without their instructor's participation. Moreover, E-learning Forums and Chats develop students' personal identity (Bing Wu, 2012:38) as they become familiar with their own identity and the personality of others.

Glossary: The glossary activity module enables participants to create and maintain a list of definitions, like a dictionary, or to collect and organise resources or information. Students can compile new vocabulary which could be shared with others; this could eventually lead to building up the students' vocabulary. They could brainstorm ideas for a project or class essay and become exposed to their classmates' ideas which stimulate interest in the topic that is discussed. This glossary could encourage students to work independently on enlarging it with all the new vocabulary and definitions that they learn throughout and after their university stage.

Hotpot: The HotPot activity allows teachers to distribute interactive learning materials to their students via Moodle and view reports on the students' responses and results. The e e-learning exercise may be a static web page or an interactive web page which offers students text, audio and visual prompts and records their responses.

This motivates independent learning as students get to attempt the exercises and get instant feedback. The prompts push them to use the language as they read, watch and listen. Teachers could ask students to write after going through the text, audio and visual prompts. Thus they practise the four language skills which improve their proficiency and simultaneously, motivates their independent learning.

Lesson: The lesson activity enables a teacher to deliver content and/or practice activities in interesting and flexible ways, such as, multiple choice, matching and short answer questions. The activity could be done by students independently and it will test their

understanding of the content. Depending on the students' choice of answer and how the teacher develops the lesson, students may progress to the next page, be taken back to a previous page or be redirected down a different path entirely and this solidifies independent learning.

Quiz: The quiz activity enables a teacher to create quizzes comprising questions of various types, including multiple choice, matching, short-answer and numerical. The teacher can allow the quiz to be attempted multiple times, with the questions shuffled or randomly selected from the question bank. A time limit may be set and the students could access the quiz independently and learn from their mistakes if the teacher provides them with answers.

SCORM Package: A SCORM Package is a collection of files and content is usually displayed over several pages, with navigation between the pages. There are various options for displaying content in a pop-up window, with a table of contents and navigation buttons. Furthermore, content could be uploaded as a zip file and added to a course. A SCORM Package may be used for presenting multimedia content and animations as well as an assessment tool. This could be accessed by students at any time and they will be able to watch, read and listen to the content material which will improve their language skills and encourage them to work independently.

Survey: The survey activity module provides a number of verified survey instruments and these survey tools are pre-populated with questions.

Workshop: The workshop activity module enables the collection, review and peer assessment of students' work. Students can submit any digital content (files), such as word-processed documents or spreadsheets and can also type text directly into a field using the text editor. Students are given the opportunity to assess one or more of their peers' submissions. Submissions and reviewers may be anonymous if required. This helps them learn independently from their peers' errors and their submission of digital content improves their writing skills.

Wiki: The wiki activity module enables participants to add and edit a collection of web pages. A wiki can be collaborative, with everyone being able to edit it, or individual, where everyone has their own wiki which only they can edit. Participating in a wiki encourages students to read other students' writing and motivates them to write independently.

3.2 E-Learning Resources

The following E-learning resources could be used by students' independently at their own pace to enhance their language proficiency as they access information in different forms which tailors to their different learning styles thus becoming independently immersed in the language.

Book: The book module enables a teacher to create a multi-page resource in a book-like format, with chapters and subchapters. Books can contain media files as well as text.

File: The file module enables a teacher to provide a file as a course resource. It could be used to share presentations given in a class or to share a mini website or draft files of certain software programs as Photoshop.

Folder: The folder module enables a teacher to display a number of related files inside a single folder, reducing scrolling on the course page.

IMS content package: An IMS content package is a collection of files and there are various options for displaying content in a pop-up window, with a navigation menu or buttons. An IMS content package may be used for presenting multimedia content and animations and content could be uploaded as a zip file.

Label: The label module enables text and multimedia to be inserted into the course page in between links to other resources and activities. It could be used to split up a long list of activities with a subheading or an image, to display an embedded sound file or video directly on the course page and to add a short description to a course section.

Page: The page enables a teacher to create a web page resource using the text editor. A page can display text, images, sound, video, web links and embedded code, such as Google maps. The page could be used to present the terms and conditions of a course or a summary of the course syllabus and to embed several videos or sound files together with some explanatory text.

URL: The URL module enables a teacher to provide a web link as a course resource. Anything that is freely available online, such as documents or images, can be linked to the students.

4. An Analysis of the E-Learning

4.1 The Advantages of the E-Learning

• It is an interactive and appealing mode of instruction and learning.

• It motivates students and increases their global awareness (Meloni, 1998).

• It encourages learners to work independently as each student can work on different tasks with the "integrated learning environment" (Wu et al., 2012). In other words, it addresses differentiation and it allows students to work according to their own pace. Advanced learners could thus be able to work faster and finish more activities than novice learners (Nedeva & Dimova, 2010). This makes students keep their personal schedules as they work at their own place and according to their own preferences.

• It improves students' language skills as they practice reading, listening, speaking and writing via the different E-learning resources and tasks.

• It increases human sustainability as students acquire skills, attitudes and attributes that benefit themselves and others and lasts in the long-term future (Irwin, D., 2012).

• It appeals to students' different learning styles as they can choose from a variety of activities and resources. It allows students who are introverts the chance to interact virtually through Forums and Chats which improves their communicative competency.
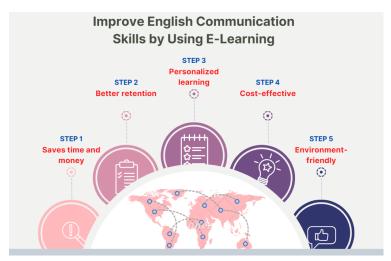
• It increases students' study time of English over the week (Fryer et al., 2014) which improves their overall language proficiency.

4.2 The Disadvantages of the E-Learning

• The absence of face-to-face teaching and body language could lead to its becoming a "solitary activity" because E-learning social interactions are mainly virtual and different from face-to-face classroom interaction.

• The lack of an actual teacher's one-to-one face-to-face feedback may be difficult for some students who might not be comfortable with virtual feedback.

• Some students may not be able to use it if they do not have Internet access.

• It leads to a decrease of social relations between students.

•Novice learners may be unable to participate if they lack human support.

Knowledge from the Study

Thanks to technology, e-learning is now made possible. Many students worldwide can now access all kinds of courses online without leaving the comfort of their homes. They are given opportunities to learn from competent educators and interact with other students from different locations. But just like in-person learning, e-learning also has its share of advantages and disadvantages. Take a look at some of them below:

1. Saves time and money

One of the most obvious advantages of e-learning is that you can save time and money. You can manage your schedule and take online courses at your most convenient time, whether early in the morning, late afternoon, or evening. You save money, too, because you don't have to pay for transportation or worry about eating on the go.

2. Better retention

E-learning makes use of different platforms like Pedagogue, which provides interactive content. Also, you can share your thoughts and opinions with others. The more engaging the lessons, the more students can remember the information.

3. Personalized learning

You can choose your learning path and study at your own pace. You become more motivated and invested in the course.

4. Cost-effective

Students aren't the only ones that can save money in e-learning. Many educational institutions save money through this set-up because there's no need to use a physical classroom, which translates to reduced monetary spending.

5. Environment-friendly

E-learning is also more environmentally friendly because it doesn't contribute to the pollution brought about by paper production.

Conclusion

E-Learning was defined by many researchers. Waterhouse (2003:47) defined it as a medium of computer technology that could be utilized to develop the application of learning and teaching. Moreover, The European Commission (2001) defines e-learning as "the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration". Using a narrower concept, Rosenberg (2001:82) stated that e-learning permits data saving, sharing and updating while Horton (2006:63) believes that e-learning allows the building up of "learning experiences of information and computer technology". It is important to note that all definitions agree to the fact that e-learning involves using computer technology to facilitate and enhance learning. E-Learning in this paper refers to the E-Learning Moodle that is used by institutions to enhance teaching and learning and to motivate students' independent learning. E-learning stands for education via the Internet, network, or standalone computer. E - learning is essentially the network-enabled transfer of skills and knowledge. It refers to using electronic applications and processes to learn. These applications and processes include Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration. The content, to be studied, is delivered via the Internet, intranet/extranet, audio or video tape, satellite TV, and CDROM. E-learning can be conducted solely through online applications. Blended e-learning includes elements of web interaction and in-person interaction. If distance is not a factor, some face-to-face communication can be included to create blended e-learning.

Technology broadens the definition of face-to face as currently two way video and two way audio could be used. Introducing these elements of participation creates a blended eLearning experience. Synchronous education means that real-time communication is implemented, such as video conferencing, teleconferencing, and on-line chat programs. Asynchronous education indicates that other means of communication are utilized that do not require real time responses. Examples of asynchronous e-learning tools include: e-mail, list serves, threaded discussions, blogs, wiki and on-line forums. E-learning also offers individualized

instruction, which printed media cannot provide, and instructor-led courses and could sometimes be quite expensive. In conjunction with assessing needs, e-learning can target specific needs. And by using learning style tests, e-learning can locate and target individual learning preferences. Additionally, synchronous e-learning is self-placed. Advanced learners are allowed to speed through or bypass instruction that is redundant while novices slow their own progress through content, eliminating frustration with themselves, their fellow learners, and the course they are taking.

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