Developing Arabic Writing Skills: Peer Feedback in Online Forum Facility on Moodle

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Abstract: The use of a learning management system (LMS) has brought a renewed attention to language teaching. Yet, a question that remains to be answered is the extent to which the system can be used to support the pedagogical approach adopted by the instructor. This paper discusses the use of Moodle as a platform for teaching Arabic in a task-based teaching environment. The LMS was used to develop students’ Arabic writing skills. Over the course of one semester, 15 pre-university students in an FL Arabic course submitted their term paper via the LMS and discussed their work using the same platform. The comparison was also made between the products of the two tasks. The study found that the quality of writing improved and there was a positive correlation between the number of words used in discussing the topic and the quality of writing produced.

Key words: Learning Management System (LMS) · Moodle · Task-based Learning

INTRODUCTION

A collaborative learning environment can be an effective platform for learners to improve their language performance. The use of a Learning Management System (LMS) helps in providing an environment for collaborative tasks. This paper discusses the use of Moodle, one of the learning management systems (LMS), in developing students’ writing skills.

The benefits of collaborative writing have been widely discussed in the literature. Despite practical issues like the individual member’s ability to contribute to learning [1-3], the grouping of students, that is, whether to have homogeneous or heterogeneous groups [4-8], the amount of time required [9-12] and the difficulty to engage students in the activity [2, 13], the advantages outweigh the challenges. This includes improving students’ critical thoughts [14-17], retention of information [1, 4] and better quality of writing performance [18, 19].

The availability of suitable tools would help in achieving the specified learning goals. The technologies can be a useful platform for collaborative writing as it allows users to interact and collaborate in a virtual community. Geographical distance will not be a barrier to communication. In an educational context, a Learning Management System (LMS) is normally used to retrieve large amount of information and to interact via computer-mediated communication (CMC) [20].

The strengths of collaborative writing using technology were investigated by [21] who compared the quality of an online synchronized collaboratively written academic paper by graduate students with similar products produced in a collaborative face to face environment. The online work environment was enabled by the use of an editing tool, the GROOVE. Using a measuring instrument called the Cognitive Level and Quality Writing Assessment (CLAQWA); it was found that higher quality paper was produced following a peer-to-peer synchronized online writing environment than a face-to-face environment.

One of the popular platforms for collaborative writing is a wiki. Studies have found that wikis can help improve students’ writing performance and teamwork (e.g. [22-23]). Students also perceived the activity positively. However, most of the studies on technology integration into collaborative writing activities were done with ESL students. This study thus, attempts to determine the extent to which Arabic writing skills can be developed using an LMS. The LMS, namely MOODLE, will be utilised to support collaborative writing activities.

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Objectives of Study
The Objectives of this Study Are To:

- Determine the extent to which writing collaboratively using Moodle can help improve students’ Arabic writing performance and
- Investigate whether the length of discussion on the forum facility correlates with students’ writing performance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study was conducted at a public university in Malaysia, that is, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Students of the University are required to achieve a certain level of Arabic proficiency depending on the program that they are pursuing. MOODLE platform was used to support Arabic classes. The primary goal of the current research project was to develop students’ writing skills. Moodle was used to complement the formal classroom instruction in developing these skills.

A total of 17 pre-university students participated in the study. These students were following lower intermediate Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) classes. They consisted of five male and twelve female students who were all Malay Malaysians.

One of the tasks that the students were required to complete was writing a term paper. They were first taught the following aspects of a term paper:

- Research problems
- Research Objectives
- Literature review
- Research methodology
- Data collection and analysis
- Conclusion

To assess the students’ understanding of the concepts, they were asked to do a mini research. Students were instructed to use the online forum facility to complete their writing task. They were encouraged to discuss their work online in stages based on the six listed aspects above. A snapshot of the forum page is given below:

The students were expected to submit two drafts before the final submission. The drafts were revised based on the feedback received from peers via the forum facility on MOODLE. The revising process can be summarized as follows:

Drafts 1 and 2 and the final paper were compared to examine their writing progress. The drafts were evaluated by two experienced Arabic instructors. The adapted version of [24] rating score was used to evaluate the students’ writing performance. Inter-rater reliability was calculated and it was found to be high at 0.95.

The total length of the students’ contribution to the discussions was counted in terms of the total number of words that they wrote. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was run to determine if there was a correlation between the total number of words used in the discussion and the quality of writing produced.

Fig. 1: A Snapshot of the Forum Page
RESULTS

A paired-sample t-test was computed to compare the means of the drafts. The results are as follows:

Table 1 shows that there was a significant difference between the results when the drafts were compared (p<0.005). The overall means of draft 1 was 91.44 and this increased to 99.00 for draft 2 and 107.44 for the final draft. A similar increase was observed with regard to their length of discussion (Tables 2, 3 and 4).

Table 2 shows that there was a significant correlation between length and quality of writing (p<0.05). The more words were used the better was the paper.

A similar trend could be seen when Table 3 is analysed. The number of words correlated with writing performance. The same performance is reflected by Table 4. The correlation was also found to be highly significant (p<0.005).

Excerpts from Students’ Works: The following are excerpts from one of the students’ works. It reflects the progress made from the first to the final draft.
Excerpt from Discussion: The following is a sample of the feedback given by one of the peers.

Elham: Educational change cannot happen without support from all stakeholders. Building strong partnerships is crucial for successful implementation.

Fig. 4: Excerpt from S1’s Draft 2

Fig. 5: Excerpt from S1’s Final Draft

Fig. 6: Excerpt from Peer Feedback
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The outcomes of this survey indicate that the online discussion had positive effects on improving AFL learners’ writing performance. The online forum gave the students the opportunity to discuss the topic one-to-many and many-to-one which resulted in an improvement in their writing performance. This result corroborates related studies such as those of [21]. As argued by [19], collaborative writing helps to improve students’ writing performance. The use of MOODLE platform facilitates the collaborative process. The program enables the learners to interact with their peers in and outside the classroom. The easy access to online forum allows learners to share ideas among them, which ensued in a better quality term paper.

REFERENCES


