

Using Three Online Course Management Systems in EFL Instruction

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Abstract

Nicenet, WebCT and Moodle were used to teach grammar to freshman students at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. The subjects were divided into three groups and were randomly assigned to the three online courses. The same questions, discussion threads, grammar websites, daily grammar lesson, exercises and quizzes were posted in the three online courses. Daily observations of student reactions, questions and discussions as well as responses to post-treatment questionnaires showed that Nicenet was the most popular. The effective and ineffective use of Online Course Management Systems in EFL instruction by female freshman students in Saudi Arabia are discussed.

1. Introduction

Thousands of students and instructors are using Online course Management Systems like Blackboard, WebCT, Online Learning, eCollege, Moodle, Manhattan Virtual Classroom and Nicenet and many others to teach all kinds of courses including EFL and ESL. A literature review showed some studies that compared the technical aspects, i.e. web course tools of some online courses. For example, Marshall University (1999) presented a chart comparison between Blackboard, Convenc, Embanet, eCollege, Saratoga Group, Symposium, TopClass, WebCT, Web Course in A Box, and WebMentor. The chart compares the software costs, hardware requirements, technical support, developmental features, student tools, instructor tools, instructional features, administrator tools, and administrative features. In addition, Wisdom tools at the Center for Excellence and Indiana University (1997) presented a chart comparing e-Web,

Internet Classroom Assistant, TopClass, Web Course in a Box, and WebCT. The chart compares overall tool features, creating a syllabus/course information, chat, conferencing, e-mail or personal messaging, administration (quizzes, tests, and grades), and then gives an overall rating. However, the differential effects of different Online Course Management Systems on the teaching and learning EFL in general and learning grammar in particular was not investigated by prior studies.

Although King Saud University has a license with WebCT and more than 60 online courses are offered in anesthesia, computer engineering, computer science, information technology, agriculture, dentistry, education, library science, mathematics physical education and Arabic as a foreign language, online courses are not currently used in language instruction at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. In this study an attempt was made to teach grammar to freshman students at COLT using WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet. The aims of the present study were to find out whether the complexity of an online course design would affect its frequency of usage; to identify technological and linguistic barriers to students' participation and interaction; and to report students' views of their online learning experience. The present study tried to answer the following questions: (1) Does the complexity of an Online Course Management System affect its frequency of usage? (2) What are the technological and linguistic barriers to students' participation and interaction? (3) How do the students feel about the three online courses and what made a particular course popular or not? To answer these questions, three groups of freshman students were randomly assigned to WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet. The impact of online instruction on EFL freshman students' grammar achievement was based on quantitative analyses of the pre and posttests. The effect of online instruction on freshman students' attitudes was based on qualitative analyses of students' responses to a post-treatment questionnaire as well as the author's daily observations and notes.

2. Participants

A total of 150 female freshman students (3 groups) were enrolled in their first grammar course. All of the students were majoring in translation at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. They were

concurrently taking listening (3 hours per week), speaking (3 hours), reading (4 hours), writing (4 hours) and vocabulary building (3 hours) courses in English as a foreign language. The subjects were all Saudi and were all native speakers of Arabic. Their ages ranged between 17 & 18 with a median age of 18 years. They all had 6 years of EFL instruction in grades 6-12 prior to their admission to COLT. All of the students had no prior experience in online instruction.

The three groups were taught grammar in-class and online by the author in Spring 2005. She has used online instruction in teaching 15 different language courses in EFL to graduate and undergraduate students using Blackboard, Nicenet, Moodle and WebCT.

3. Pretesting

Before instruction, the three groups were pre-tested. They took the same grammar test. Results of a one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences between the three groups in their knowledge of English grammar before grammar instruction began ($F = 1.8$; $df = 147$ and the mean scores = 26%, 24% & 23% respectively).

4. In-class Instruction

The three groups were exposed to the same in-class instruction. The topics covered in class were: *parts of speech, prepositions, prepositional phrases, transitive and intransitive verbs, linking verbs, regular and irregular verbs, adverb placement, information, tag, negative and yes-no questions, negatives, regular and irregular plurals, use of definite and indefinite articles, pronouns, subject-verb agreement, 9 tenses, modals, pronunciation of -ed, -s and -es at the end of verbs and nouns, spelling of -ing, -ed, -es*. The students studied the same grammar textbook *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (3rd Edition) by Betty Azar and completed the same exercises and grammatical structures in that textbook and took the same in-term tests and final exam (post-test). The grammar course was taught twice a week for 12 weeks.

5. Treatment (Online Instruction)

Three Online Course Management Systems were used as a supplement to in-class instruction: WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet. The author used KSU's subscription with WebCT and the course had to be accessed through the KSU website. The WebCT course contained the following tools: course organizer, grammar topics, discussion forum, personal messaging, calendar, chat room, content module, whiteboard, study tips, student homepages, assignments, quizzes/surveys, my grades, image database, external links, a grammar CD and search. Moodle was accessed free of charge through the Online Writing Collaboration Project (OWCP). The Moodle course contained the following tools: Online discussion forums (news forums), resources, a calendar, personal messaging and announcements. Webpages, Powerpoint and Flash presentation, pictures, video clips, questionnaires, tests and exercises can be designed and uploaded. The author could not delete or add tools in Moodle as she was not the administrator and was not authorized to do so. The Nicenet course was accessed using www.nicenet.org. It is free of charge. It contains the following tools: conferencing, link sharing, course documents, a calendar and personal messaging. Both WebCT and Moodle are open source courses where the instructor can design and tailor the course tools according to the students' needs and course requirements. No tools can be added or modified in Nicenet.

Each of the three freshman groups was randomly assigned to an online course. The students used their own PC's and Internet from home, as the Internet was inaccessible from COLT. They were given the URL and class key and they enrolled themselves. The author had to provide online instruction herself. Enrollment in the online courses was optional since 45% of the students had Internet access at home. Students in the three groups were given extra credit for using the online courses.

Prior to online instruction, the students' computer literacy skills were assessed by a questionnaire. All of the students had a PC at home; but only 45% had access to the Internet, had an e-mail, and could browse the Internet and chat. A tutorial was given to them for reference. The online course tools were described and instructions on how to use a certain course tool were given orally. Online instruction in the three courses was

initiated by posting a welcome note and by starting a discussion topic. She could not provide hands-on practice as there are no PC's and no Internet access in the college classrooms.

Every week, the same grammar websites (hyperlinks) related to the grammar topic covered in class were added. The links contained explanations, examples, exercises and quizzes and a daily grammar lessons. Questions that required the use of a particular tense or grammatical structure were posted in the discussion forum of each online course. In addition, the students could post short paragraphs on any topic of their choice. They checked the specific grammar links posted, answered the quizzes and were encouraged to check the daily grammar lesson.

Throughout the semester, the author served as a facilitator. She provided technical support on using the different components of the online course, and responded to individual students' comments and requests for certain sites. The author sent public and private messages to encourage the students to interact and communicate. She had to look for relevant websites and post them in each online course. She had to post questions and discussion topics and write model responses every week.

6. Procedures

Before instruction, all of the groups were pretested. They took the same grammar pretest that consisted of questions covering the grammatical topics to be studied. At the end of the semester, the three groups took the same posttest that covered all of the grammatical topics studied throughout the semester. In addition, all of the students answered an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the course, which consisted of the following questions: *(1) Did you register in the online course? If you did not, why not? (2) What did you like about the online course and what did you not like? (3) Has your English improved as a result of using the online course? In what ways has it improved? (4) Did it make any difference in learning English grammar? (5) If you did not post any responses or paragraphs in the online course, Why? (6) What problems or difficulties did you have in using the online course?*

7. Findings and Discussion

7.1 Student Participation

Daily observations of student reactions, questions and discussions as well as responses to the post-treatment questionnaire showed that Nicenet was the most popular, whereas WebCT and Moodle were less popular. Students enrolled in Nicenet were the most active and responsive. They posted 183 responses in 4 weeks as opposed to 4 posts in Moodle and WebCT. The effective use of Nicenet and the ineffective use of Moodle and WebCT were due to the online course design, students' linguistic competence, and technical support provided. Each factor is discussed below.

7.1.1 Course design

The students reported that the Nicenet course is easy to use. It has a plain design and does not require advanced IT skills. It uses few course tools: Discussion forums, resources, and personal messaging. The course tools are easily seen in the main page. Logging into the course is easy. Accessing the discussion forum and resources are easy too. The students did not have to go through several webpages to login and access the discussion forums and resources. They found it easy to post threads and browse responses and resources. However, the students reported that they could not format their posted material, they could not insert nor upload digital pictures or video clips to support the material they posted. They could not have audio or video conferencing with each other. The author could not design her own tests and exercises and could not upload graphics and Powerpoint presentations.

On the other hand, the inadequate use of Moodle and WebCT are due to the complexity of the course design. Each of them has many course tools. To log into WebCT, the students had to go through KSU website then through several pages. To log into Moodle, they had to go through the OWCP main page then several webpages. The students reported that the WebCT and Moodle main pages are confusing, as each contains a lot of information. The students reported that accessing and using the discussion forums, resources, personal messaging tool were complicated as they did not have adequate IT skills.

7.1.2 Linguistic factors

The Nicenet course uses few technical terms referring to the course tools. Since the students' were in their first semester in the translation program and had a limited proficiency level in English, it was easy for them to understand those terms. Explaining their meaning in class was not time consuming. By contrast, Moodle and WebCT use many technical terms with which the students were not familiar. Explanations in class were abstract as they could not see the course tools on the screen in class.

7.1.3 Technical Support

Since the Nicenet course has few course tools, providing technical support and solving students' problems were easy and not time-consuming in class. On the contrary, Moodle and WebCT have many course tools and the author could not provide hands-on practice as there were no PC's class and no Internet in the college. The author did not have sufficient time in the classroom to brainstorm topics before and after posting and could not go through the material in the hyperlinks in class.

7.2 Effect on Achievement

Comparisons of the posttest scores showed significant differences among the three groups in grammar achievement ($F = 12.81$; $DF = 147$; $p < 0.001$; means = 78, 68, 65 respectively). The Nicenet group made higher gains than the Moodle and the WebCT groups. However, improvement may not be attributed to the Nicenet online course itself, but to the extra practice provided by the course.

7.3 Effect on Attitudes

Analysis of student comments and responses to the post-treatment questionnaire revealed positive attitudes among the students who participated in the Nicenet course towards online learning and the grammar course under study. The Nicenet group found the online grammar course useful and fun, and considered it a new way of learning English grammar and doing homework. It created a warm-climate between the students and instructor and among the students themselves. They found the exercises in the hyperlinks useful, as they provided more practice and gave instant feedback. The exercises helped clarify difficult points and helped the students review for the in-terms.

It made the class material easier. However, some students did not take the initiative to post any responses if not prompted by the instructor and if the instructor does not post new topics and post a sample response.

By contrast, the WebCT and Moodle groups were not motivated and had negative attitudes towards online learning. They did not like them and found them difficult to use and time consuming. Many students did not take online instruction seriously as it was not used by other instructors and students at COLT. The author could not make the online course mandatory and could not allocate a proportion of the course grade to it. Using the Internet as a learning tool was not part of some students' culture. Some were so used to traditional instruction that depended on the book. They indicated that they were not net browsers and preferred to study the textbook only. They also believed that online courses should be used for fun not for credit and serious studying. Many Saudi college students do extra work for grades only. If online instruction is not part of tests and grades, they will not participate.

8. Conclusion

The present study found that Nicenet was more popular than WebCT and Moodle among Saudi EFL freshman students enrolled in their first grammar course at COLT. Using Nicenet had a positive effect on students' achievement. This means that online instruction using Nicenet proved to be a powerful tool for improving students' achievement in grammar. This finding is consistent with findings of prior studies using other forms of technology in grammar instruction such as Zhuo (1999), Collentine (2000) and Nagata's (1996) studies. Zhuo concluded that hypermedia-based instruction was very effective in grammar teaching and learning. Collentine reported that user-behavior tracking technologies promoted the abilities of foreign-language learners of Spanish in generating indirect speech. Nagata found that ongoing intelligent computer feedback was more effective than simple workbook answer sheets in developing learners' grammatical skill in producing Japanese particles and sentences.

Like Frigaard's study (2002) in which the students preferred to learn vocabulary and grammar in the classroom rather than in the computer lab, the WebCT and Moodle

groups preferred to study grammar in class; whereas the Nicenet group showed interest in learning grammar online.

Moreover, the Nicenet group revealed positive effects of online instruction on students' attitudes towards online instruction and the grammar course. This finding is also consistent with findings of other studies. For instance, Lin (2004) found that international students' attitudes towards ESL were positively related to their attitudes toward computers. Their attitude towards ESL was also positively related to their perceived computer competency improvement and their experience in ESL was positively related to their perceived computer competency improvement. In Chen's study (2004), freshmen and sophomores students in Taiwan expressed significantly positive attitudes toward educational technology use in EFL instruction. Moreover, Felix (2001) reported that on the whole, students were positively inclined to working with the web and found it useful. The majority preferred to use the web as a supplement to face-to-face teaching. Furthermore, intermediate level community college ESL students and teachers expressed very positive attitudes toward using LEE (Schnackenberg, 1997). As in Schnackenberg's computer software LEE, online grammar instruction in the present study provided additional grammar practice, a self-paced and non-threatening learning environment to the Nicenet group but not to the WebCt and Moodle groups. The students enjoyed using the online course and felt it helped them learn.

Finally, the present study recommends that online courses be selected carefully and online instruction be introduced gradually when used in a no-tech environment and with freshman students with a low proficiency level in English and computer terms and with no prior experience in online instruction such as Saudi EFL freshman students at COLT. Online instruction from home may start with Nicenet. When students become more sophisticated linguistically and technologically, they might proceed to Moodle and WebCT. Since Moodle and WebCT are open source courses, the instructor may start with two tools (discussion forums and resources) and add tools gradually.

To encourage the students to participate, the instructor has to prompt the students and motivate them. Rules for using the online course should be made clear. The minimum number of posts may be specified. Administrative support is also required in order for the students to take the online course seriously. Discussion topics may be brainstormed before and after posting and the instructors and students can go through the material in the hyperlinks in class. To provide hands-on practice to the students, a small network using the students' laptops may be built in the classroom. The Internet may be accessed using mobile technology rather than the university LAN or phone line. Those suggestions can be the focus of further experiments in the future.

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