SOME REFLECTIONS ON MOODLE-BASED LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH FOUNDATION PROGRAMME OF SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Further development of computer and communication technologies and applications has brought from latency toward almost complete integration an absolutely new paradigm of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman. This paradigm has given birth to a dynamic and meaningful perspective (Nunan, 1987) of learning in the environment that allows students' to enhance their skills and competencies, communicate and work using a variety of tools (Scully, 2008), platforms and targeted websites. Using the example of the English Foundation Programme's Moodle - based courses, which are offered by the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, the authors demonstrate that learning in a Moodle-based environment - through its flexibility and facility of access – enables novice students nurture the idea of "knowledge maintenance" and adapt to the modern academic environment and its fast changing needs especially in the field of general and academic language acquisition. They also highlight the importance of the content of the Moodle-based courses, which, according to them, should be interesting, motivating and more consistent with students' culture and traditions.

Keywords: Sultan Qaboos University, English Foundation Programme, Moodle-based language learning

INTRODUCTION

Recent research indicates the increasing importance of computer and communication technology in language education. Mark Warschauer (2000) argues that "technology itself does not determine human behavior, such as how we teach. However, it does create the possibilities for new forms of behavior and of education." (p. 61) He further continues that these new possibilities emerge due to the development in technology, and lead to the changes of the entire context of language teaching, and to the significance of new literacies, new genres, new identities, and new pedagogies of language teaching (Warschauer, 2000:62). According to this important view, technology transforms the whole language learning environment. Research also suggests that technology provides opportunities for students' engagement with real language in meaningful contexts as well as their empowerment as active creators of ideas (Kenworthy, 2004) and communicators (El Hindi, 1998; Chafe, 1999). Within the context of language learning there are several perspectives and possible affordances of technology. Advocates of technology in education believe that when used as a source of reading materials (Amer, 2004); an instrument for teaching writing (Kenworthy, 2004) and a platform for developing students' language and communication skills, the technology becomes a developmental tool (Warschauer, 2000). According to Warschauer (2002), the developmental perspective on technology in language education involves overcoming psychological barriers, creating a friendly and interesting learning environment. This view is supported by Cleborn (1997); Aebersol and Field (1997) who believe that such

learning environment can help students to better understand their own developmental orientations and exercise their agency.

Taking the advantage of the developments in technology, and the associated changes in language learning pedagogy, Oman's higher education institutions are currently promoting various computer tools, services and platforms to their English language programmes. One of such programmes is the English Foundation Programme, which is currently offered across public and private higher education sector in the Sultanate of Oman to provide students with a smooth transition from the Arabic medium school to the English medium university/college and help them to adjust to university life. However, in spite of such initiatives the effects of technology and their impact on language learners' "individual and societal development" (Warschauer, 2002: 453) are still not quite clear and need investigation. This paper focuses on Moodle-based English language learning in the Foundation Programme at Sultan Qaboos University to demonstrate that this mode of learning - through its flexibility and facility of access – can help in ensuring transition from Arabic medium school to English medium university, providing an induction to university life and enabling Omani students to adapt to the fast changing needs of higher education.

Sultan Qaboos University Foundation Programme: Resources, Teachers' and Students' Profile

The Language Centre is the largest learning component in Sultan Qaboos University. The Language Centre has a tremendous asset in human resources since more than 220 well-qualified and experienced teachers, who come from 29 countries, work there. The Language Centre prepares students for specialized programmes offered by the university colleges in English and provides various credit programmes for Arabic-medium colleges. It also offers the English Foundation Programme courses. These courses implement an outcome-oriented curriculum and are designed to help students to become independent learners who are well prepared for their degree programmes and the world of work. They are also aimed at extending the English language skills of the students to enable active participation in their higher education studies. The primary focus of the Foundation Programme courses is "on student learning outcomes, placing the students and their potential contribution to society at the heart of higher education. These outcomes are not achieved by chance, but are the result of carefully planned and executed formal programmes of study" (Oman Academic Standards, 2010: 4) that follow some structural and resourcing requirements.

The prominent attributes of the Language Centre that relate to the Foundation Programme include such resources as a library, a Writing Centre, a Tutorial Centre and seven computer labs. These resources cater to the diverse individual needs of the students, provide guidance to students at different levels as well as promote self-study and autonomous learning. The Language Centre also features an Academic Support Unit. This unit exists to create and develop a technology-integrated, networking culture at the Language Centre and enable all teachers in the Foundation Programme to have easy access to and use of knowledge, information, practice, materials and support to improve their teaching.

Teachers are central to the implementation of the Foundation Programme curriculum in the Language Centre. They are committed to developing both integrative language and communicative skills of the students. This commitment to enhance language learning and empower students with vital learning skills is currently accomplished with the help of up-to-date innovative teaching methodologies, integrated computer and communication technologies and targeted websites. Interestingly, the challenge related to this commitment does not lie in pure techniques or latest technologies. In fact, it is rooted, as Jaaffar (2002)

states, in an approach that acknowledges the essentially human element of the instructional process: the learners and the people who help them to learn.

The study of the learner (Littlewood, 1984:1) and focus on students' developmental styles and cultural orientations as well as language learning environment (Aebersol & Field, 1997) have always been prerequisites in theories of effective language learning. In technology-based language education, the socio-cultural portrait of learners and social factors of educational environment have a pivotal role in shaping the context of learning, and adjusting it to the needs of the learners. These factors, according to Warschauer & Matuchniak (2010), can "support or constrain use of computers or the internet in schools, often in ways that heighten educational inequity" (p.188).

What are our students like? The students in the Foundation Programme are novices at the university and are adjusting to academic life. Their learning environment has changed from Arabic medium of instruction to English and from single sex classes to mixed gender classrooms. Moreover, it has incorporated traditional and digital/ virtual learning environments where they are given various activities and tasks and are required improved study and skills. The students mostly come from similar backgrounds in Oman with a few international students from United Arab Emirates and have been educated at government schools in different parts of the country. The majority of the students are taught English at school by Omani or Indian teachers. When at the university they find themselves in a unique educational, social and cultural setting in which they have to communicate with the teachers and faculties from diverse cultures and nationalities. This practice of a foreign language learning "outside the familiar" is not very easy for the students and sometimes it adds a lot of additional challenges to the students.

The abilities of the students in English are varied. Some of the students, especially those coming from the capital area of Oman, probably had more exposure to English than other prior to entering the university. But the majority of the students had little opportunity outside the classroom to practice what English they had learned in class and contact with English in real-life situations. The majority of the students encounter some difficulties with listening and speaking in a normal situation. They are often at a loss for words and quite often resort to using their native tongue. They also have difficulties in conveying their thoughts and true ideas both in speaking and writing as their written reports are immature quite often. As a rule most of the students are well motivated and willingly take part in different class activities. But as the authors' experience shows the motivation of both male and female students increases when the content of the assignments is clear to them and conforms to their everyday life, personal and academic needs. Additionally, inner resources of the students are substantially vitalized when the content is delivered within the framework of computer-based activities and tasks. To exemplify, according to the English Foundation Programme students, Moodle –based activities are among three most important learning environment components that support their motivation and independent learning, following such components as 'teachers" and "relations with other students" (Al-Busiaidi & Tuzlukova, 2013).

Moodle-Based English Foundation Programme Courses: An Overview

Moodle-based English courses have been generated within the Foundation Programme since Fall 2010 with the aim to provide a communicative student-centered language learning environment and to encourage the development of the students' linguistic and communicative skills, independent learning and team work. Most of the courses have been designed to correspond in their structure and content to six levels of the Foundation Programme and to provide additional support to the students in grammar, reading, speaking, writing, listening,

and vocabulary practice. They have also been customized to feature course documents, activities (e.g. quizzes, discussion forums, sample tests, students' work and projects, etc.); resources (e.g. English skills software, on-line monolingual and bilingual glossaries, dictionaries and thesauri, Wikipedia, Google Scholar, Simple English Wikipedia, Wiktionary, StatPlanet, Randal's Cyber Listening Lab, etc.) as well as teaching materials (e.g. reading samples, texts, major-oriented sheets and activities, videos, etc.) to be used for classroom, self-study and extra-curricular activities, consequently "ensuring multiple improvements in the language proficiency of the students" (Kraus, 2002). These courses have been designed and run by programme and course coordinators with teachers functioning as courses' facilitators and moderators and members of the Language Centre Academic Support Unit providing technical assistance and professional development.

Teaching Materials

The electronic teaching materials for the Foundation Programme courses on Moodle platform come from different sources including internet, local media and local literature. It is well known that the internet contains a wealth of information of particular interest to students including the stories, articles and advice on an enormously broad array of topics. In spite of their appeal to students' genuine interests, most of these materials are not written from the perspective of language learning and they very often tend to be unusually rich in idioms, colloquialisms, and neologisms - language which receives inadequate attention in many textbooks. To complement the content of the Moodle-based courses for the Foundation Programme students and to help them to find a treasure trove of linguistic, social and cultural information, the teachers of the Language Centre often develop their own teaching materials with a special appeal for the needs and interests of the students. To make language learning stimulating and to provide a clear and comprehensible entry into the foundations of English language grammar, vocabulary and functions, they, first of all, try to personalize and individualize teaching materials. This means addressing each student's needs and finding examples from the students' own experience and culture. Other principles that stand behind materials and tasks on the Foundation Programme Moodle-based courses include: e*nhancement of language learning and increase of motivation* with the effective use of strategies and procedures of blended learning (face-to-face and computer-mediated); *development of content* that exemplifies the students' own experience and culture, bringing together global and local by incorporating authentic Omani English language materials; *matching* course content with educational environment (multicultural and diverse) and content of learning and *adapting* the course design and content to the objectives of integrated skills teaching; *construction* of a course that serves as a reference, a source of learning, a support of learning and one that motivates and stimulates the students and *linking* identity, technology and culture (Wood, 2001) (See Appendix 1).

Teachers also integrate materials that correspond to the students' real-life situations and practices, and are original and authentic. The term "authentic" is quite frequently used in ESL/EFL research for identifying genuine real materials produced by the native speakers of English. But with the origination of "world Englishes" and further development of English as an international language, the understanding of "authenticity' is gradually becoming disputable. This variability and diverse understanding could be traced in different approaches to clarifying the notion of authenticity brilliantly reviewed and described by Trabelsi (2007). According to this researcher, there are four types of authenticity: a) authenticity of the real social situation of the language classroom; b) authenticity of the learners' own interpretation of the tasks; c) authenticity of the tasks leading to language; d) authenticity of the texts which are exposed to learners and considered as input (Trabelsi, 2007). Although there seems to be

a lack of consensus on a varied and broader understanding of authenticity, authenticity means real communication for social and cultural purposes and has an unquestionable connection with culture as a pedagogical tool (Lado, 1957). In the context of the Foundation Programme teaching materials culture is understood as "a particular way of life, which expresses certain meaning and values" (Byram, 1989, p.80), as shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and affective understanding that are learned through the process of socialization (Lillejohn & Windeatt ,1989). These values and attributes are reflected in the language and taught by means of the language. In this respect authentic materials are viewed as teaching materials that are more consistent with national/regional culture, students' cultural and social perception as well as with social and cultural diversity.

The experience of running Moodle-based Foundation Programme courses demonstrates that opportunities involved in using authentic and locally published materials are enormous. However, there are certain challenges, especially when choosing such materials for the Foundation Programme students who are still struggling with their English and are experiencing their transition from Arabic medium school to English medium university. The selection of materials can be described as a sequential process of inquiry, analysis and creation (synthesis and integration) on the part of the teacher. The *inquiry stage* leads teachers to a clear understanding of their own objectives and helps them to select the materials that optimally go with them. At this stage teachers answer the questions related to the students' learning needs, materials' level and suitability, etc. The inquiry stage is followed by the stages of *materials' search and selection.* These stages are mainly influenced by such pedagogical implications as content "suitability"; personal, academic and professional interest (Day, 1994); contribution to students' experience and effective involvement in real life practices; relation to the Foundation Programme courses' objectives and structure; sensitivity to integrated skills teaching paradigm and individual learning styles; correspondence to the Moodle-based environment of learning; social and cultural sensitivity (Tuzlukova, V., Eltayeb C., 2007). Later the materials are sorted and classified. Their reliability, content and language are assessed for further adaptation and adjustment. At the stage of adaptation teachers synthesize, integrate, and design questions and assignments to adapt the materials to suit teaching and learning needs. Larry M. Lynch (2005) in "Creating Materials for the EFL Classroom" suggests several key reasons for the adaptation of existing materials. They include the language level of the materials; their length; their (possible) irrelevance to the immediate needs and objectives (especially in integrated language teaching and learning). He also suggests some adjustment procedures, which, as our experience of teaching materials' design shows, are very simple and yet very effective. For example, the materials are simplified / rendered if they are too difficult; shortened if they are too long; supplied by a glossary, definitions or explanations if vocabulary or grammar featured in the materials are not known to the learners; adapted as to correspond to the course/unit/lesson objectives; adjusted to the students learning styles within the integrated skills teaching paradigm, e.g. supporting a reading passage with listening; made relevant for the needs and interests of learners to promote meaningful input and output as well as effective English language acquisition.

Learning with regional materials in the English language is not a new concept in the English language pedagogy (Al Maqrooqi, 2007), though it has not been widely integrated into practice. However, the experience of the English Foundation Programme at Sultan Qaboos University demonstrates that when used as a content of the Moodle-based courses, these materials help to personalize the educational process (Key and Jones, 2000). They also help create a meaningful learning environment and give students the opportunity to deal with

language created by and for English speaking residents within their own culture. Thus they do not only expose the students as English language learners to vocabulary and structures that are real and natural to native speakers. They also relate to and tend not to contradict the students' own cultural and social context. Moreover, effectively engaging the students into highly-contextualized real life practices with the help of the Moodle platform, they appear to be a sufficient support for the students who have a limited language learning experience and have little opportunity to practice their English language skills outside the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS LEARNT

Modern advancements in computer and communication technologies have tremendously enhanced language learning practices within the framework of the English Foundation Programme at Sultan Qaboos University due to their flexibility and facility of access. When supported with activities that are interesting, motivating and more consistent with culture and traditions, these technologies act as educational tools to simulate the innovative environment of language learning and to empower students in sense of motivation and independent studies. This approach helps to bring students towards a better adjustment to university life. In addition the educational expediency of the usage of targeted websites and Web-based resources could be traced in the overall effect of the communicative classroom displayed in improvement of study skills and English language integrated skills, especially in the areas of communication and the expansion of vocabulary.

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APPENDIX 1

UNIT 1: HOW TO INTRODUCE YOURSELF

When you meet the person you are going to interview, do not forget to say **Hello. My name is (X). I am a student at SQU.** You can also start with **Good-morning** or **Good-afternoon** depending on the time of day and then introduce yourself.

As an interviewer you should remember to explain to the interviewee the reason for the interview and ask politely for a time and place for an interview.

When you have finished with your interview do not forget to *label it (put the date of the interview, place of the interview, full name of the person being interviewed).*

Exercises

1. Brainstorm to make a list of possible questions that would be asked in an interview to obtain the information about the person's life, educational and professional background.
2. Read the conversation and find the questions which tell you more about the people. Are your ideas the same?

Nada: Hello. My name's Nada. What's your name?

Fatma: Hi, Nada. Nice to meet you. My name's Fatma.

Nada: Nice to meet you, Fatma. So, **where are you from?**

Fatma: Well, originally I'm from Salalah, but we moved to Muscat when I was about five years old. **How about you, Nada?**

Nada: I was born in Sur, and we lived there until I was seven. Then, because my father worked for an oil company, we lived in different places in Oman.

Fatma: Oh yes? **Where are some of the places you've lived?**

Nada: Mostly, we were in the north of Oman. We spent ten years in Musandam. Then we were transferred to Muscat three years ago.

Fatma: Wow! It sounds interesting. So, **what do you do now?**

Nada: I'm a student at Sultan Qaboos University.

Fatma: Oh really? **What do you study?**

Nada: I take the Foundation Programme. **How about you? What do you do?**

Fatma: Well, I am a sales representative for Nawras.

Nada: Really? My brother works there too.