

A Distance Education Model for INSET: Moodle

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Abstract

After the integration of technology into language teaching, the paradigms of teacher and learner have changed over the last few years; accordingly, there arose a more need for a renovation in foreign language teaching. Language teacher education requires the acquisition of basic teacher competencies. A language teacher is supposed to be equipped with pedagogical knowledge as well as content knowledge. The issue of language teaching, as the PCK (pedagogical content knowledge) [1] presents itself as the main concern for theoreticians and practitioners alike with the introduction of every new method or approach in ELT (English Language Teaching). For this reason, this model aims to handle the issues in teaching as well as giving classroom application tips to help the language teacher in this controversial domain. As a distance education tool, the model is based on the use of MOODLE (Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment). It aims to provide a training package for the teachers so that they can gain insight into the teaching experience as well as a collaborative and sharing environment.

1. Introduction

Language teacher education has made a shift from theory to practice, the reflections of which can be felt in all fields of course frames. These programs now heavily rely on constructivist, bottom up practices of language teacher candidates in line with humanistic approach, which considers the self as a whole. In this way, it has become possible for teachers to invest on the self, and the recent trend is towards a more process oriented, constructivist approach, in which teachers can become familiar with the nature of teaching through a more mental involvement in the profession.

The change in the trend takes its roots in the teacher paradigms as the outcome of different schools of thought: While Zeichner [2] classifies the teachers in behaviorist, personal, traditional craft norms; Wallace [3] underlines the paradigms of craft model, applied science model, and reflective model. Unlike the past, when traditional teacher education paradigms were prevalent, today teachers are considered as active givers rather than passive takers. This new approach to language teachers allows for a permanent and continual space for change, thus giving the opportunity to trigger constructivist mechanisms.

The model in this study aims to introduce an online environment to meet the professional needs of the teachers as a complementary INSET design. It has been inspired by the individual talks between the mentor and the student-teachers at the faculty during their pre-service years, after which time they became graduates and now are working as practitioners. The model takes its strength from constructivism, which suggests lifelong learning, and INSET, which perfectly functions as a follow-up to support and update the novice teachers, who may have decontextual pedagogical knowledge.

2. Web-based Tools as Learning Platforms and Distance INSET

The current systems of learning have shifted from face-to face interaction to online web-based learning, or as an in-between category, blended learning. The learning of the latter type is more preferable to the former one which solely involves the interaction online, without any human interference. ICT tools in the form of teaching sources have paved the way for another learning platform, and made it possible for the learner to have more options of time and place for the learning to take place as well as deciding on the amount of the content to be learnt.

The positive, less limited conditions of learning given above account for why e-learning has gained momentum in recent years. Though the variety and abundance of terminology blurs the boundary of the learning itself, it is seen that all these names- CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication), VLE (Virtual Learning Environments), ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), CMS (Course Management System), among others - more or less refer to the same type of online learning, except for the blended form. However, Martens&Achten [4] makes a clarification between e- learning as an umbrella term and VLE which offers technical solutions. The common ground for both is that neither includes a face-to face interaction between the teacher and the student.

As a lifelong process, teachers have to update their knowledge through a learning system. In-service teachers require professional development due to the two reasons that Hellmig [5] suggests; to be more sufficient to teach the subject and to improve the skills and knowledge to upgrade the teaching quality of the given subject. This can be possible through INSET, which works as a professional development tool.

It is a fact that the type of INSET, the content and the duration of the program as well as the target group are basic issues that have to be observed while designing these courses. While online courses free the course participants from time and place constraints, the fine tuning that has to be made still remains a clutter of work to be realized. Compton [6] suggests that according to the level of teaching, pedagogical skills vary; the novice teachers attach great importance to get the required information and knowledge, proficient teachers to the application of the knowledge and creativity, and expert teachers lay emphasis on creativity with knowledge and application. These factors make INSET a program with many components that needs to be handled with great care for the participants to make the optimum use.

Now technology makes it possible to provide distance INSET in different forms, not just limited to the top-down, prescribed courses, which do not always meet the virtual needs of the teachers. In this way, the prescriptive top-down model in teacher education has replaced life-long learning, because teacher training, imposed or top-down, is a process in which skills are "imparted" and "honed" [7]. As Voithofer [8] suggests, since the technologies are connected to each other, teacher education programs have got more chance to combine and go on among lots of courses. Saleh&Pretorious [9] claims that the use of the internet has changed the course of the professional development with the ongoing opportunities for the teachers to improve their teaching practices.

3. Teacher Development and Distance INSET through MOODLE

The concepts of training, development and education are sometimes used interchangeably. To Widdowson [10], teacher training is the implication that teachers are to be given specific instruction in practical techniques to cope with predictable events while teacher education is problem-oriented, with the implication of a broader intellectual awareness of theoretical principles underlying particular practices [10]. On the other hand, Wallace [3] points out that training or education is something which can be presented or managed by others; whereas development is something that can be done only by and for oneself [3]. This model uses the basic distinction to be drawn from these definitions: once the

self, initiative, and individual wish merge with the profession, a life-long process; namely, professional development emerges.

As the social dimension of language teaching is gaining more and more recognition, which builds up the line between the social constructivist and the reflective teacher [7], a language teacher mostly works on the experiences and ideas of the others. This allows for the change in the self, and leads to a more collaborative, long-lasting and enjoyable process. Thanks to the improvements in technology, the globe is affected and inspired even by the slightest change in any field. This opportunity has its reflections as the uses of web-based tools, one of which is MOODLE (Modular-Object-Oriented-Dynamic-Learning-Environment). The Professional development model aims to improve the teacher participation and interaction on the social aspect, while allowing for the change in the self on the constructivist aspect.

4. Moodle as a Professional Development Tool

The basic definition of Moodle is that it is an Open Source Course Management System (CMS), also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It is a socio-constructivist tool, thus creating online dynamic web sites for learners all around the world. Pearson [11] states that Moodle is undoubtedly an excellent tool to support online communities in which participants can easily communicate with each other synchronously and asynchronously. In this way, teachers can easily share their materials online and establish good rapport with other colleagues and students. The social constructivist property of Moodle allows learners to share their roles and makes them become both the student and the teacher of their own learning processes [12].

Distance professional development is becoming a common practice: "Taiwanese Tertiary Teachers of English: Professional Development Program" and "WIAOC: 2005 Webheads in Action Online Convergence" are some of the applications stated by Su&Garcia [13]. Another good application by which this study was also inspired is "English language teachers' self evaluation of ICT skills, use and pedagogical content knowledge in an electronic in-service training (e-INSET) programme" by Çakmak&Arap [14].

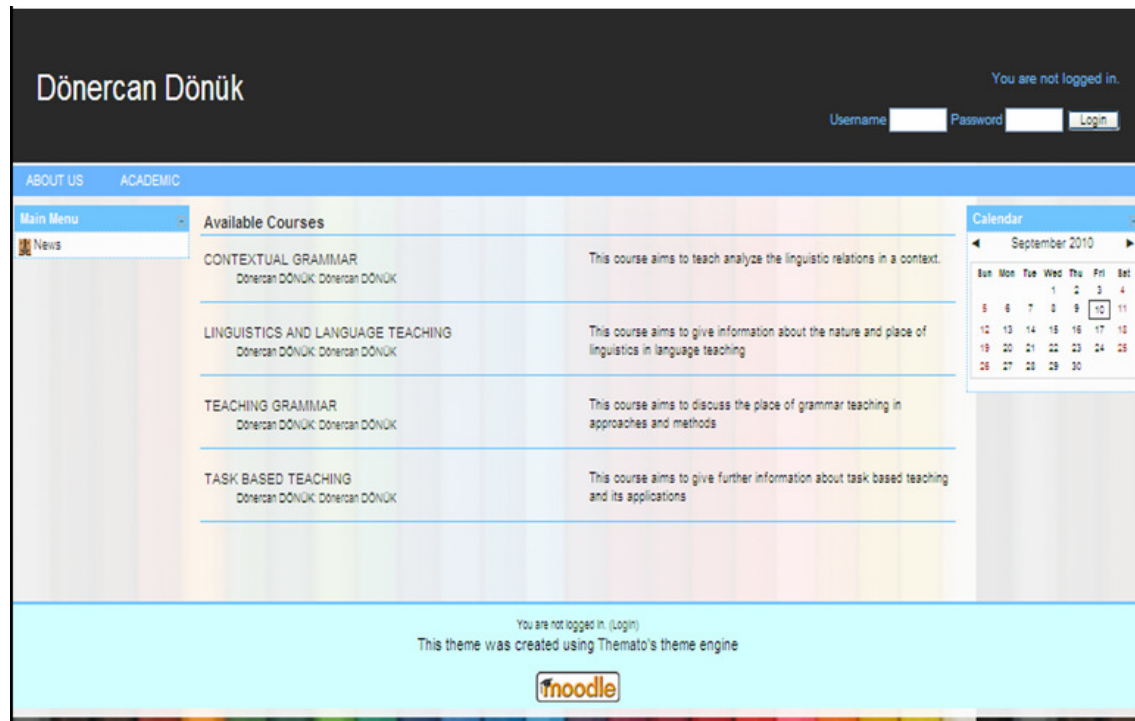
The socio-constructivist feature of Moodle makes it ideal for collaboration, in which teachers can use this program to update themselves with the recent issues in teaching as well as sharing educational materials and new insights into classroom practices. Nowadays teachers are also researchers, with a great deal of action research planning during their practices. These plans can be triggered and put into action with other researchers from the academic world, or by their own means on the Moodle platform. Proietta [15] states that there should be chances to combine teaching and learning together with the latest research on contents and ways of teaching, but for this to happen, a coordination with the academic communities is necessary.

Moodle, due to its modular design, can be shaped as needed. It can have many modules for different purposes, with different participants at different times. The basic, core modules of Moodle involves creating courses, sending questions to a forum, giving a quiz, grading the results, chatting, sending a questionnaire, starting a workshop, using the wiki, and loading MP3 and flash files. However, our model suggests some basic uses of Moodle, for it relies on in- depth utilization of these modules.

The Course Management Module uses the online teaching and learning opportunities. Brandl [16] states that Moodle is a teacher's dream as regards course management features it provides. The system in the model works in line with language teaching, except that participants are novice teachers. As the procedure, the teachers subscribe to courses assigned by the instructor, update their content knowledge through the text and videos the instructor provides, do the assignments and answer the question finally asked to move to the next step.



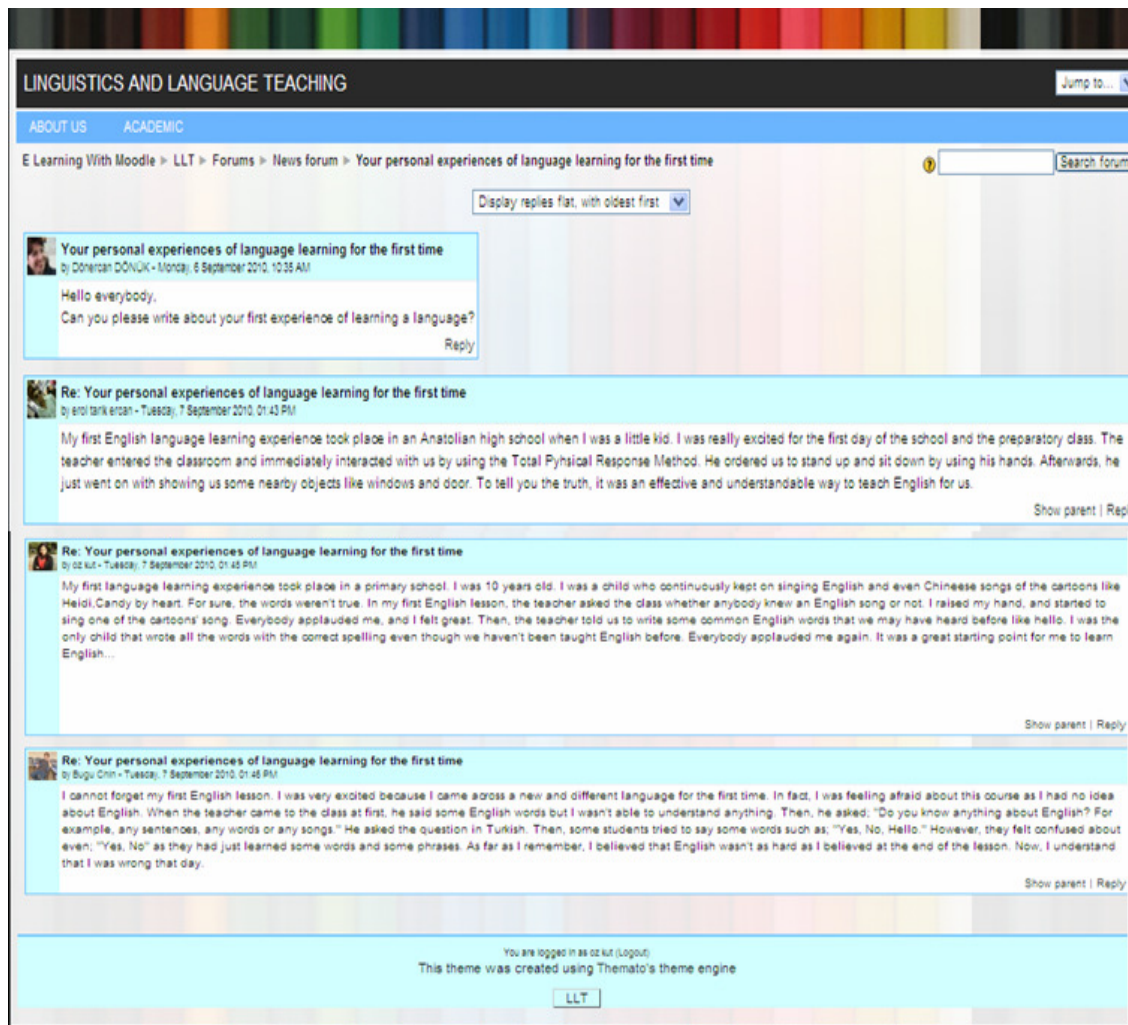
Figure 1. The screenshot of the home page of the Moodle course



One of the courses in Figure 1, "Teaching Grammar", involves the discussion of the place of grammar teaching from the past to the present. The instructor discusses the subject, also providing samples of grammar teaching on the basis of approaches and methods in modules week by week. Besides, the duration of the task and the deadline for the finalization utilities also enable the instructor to place an automatic control system on the module.

The Forum Module enables the forum members to communicate with each other asynchronously. In this way, participants can give virtual seminars both as peers among themselves, and to the instructor on a topic selected before. The variety of responses from participants makes it possible to brainstorm and discuss on one of the current issues.

Figure 2. The screenshot from the Forum Module



In Figure 2, the screenshot from the forum page can be seen. The sample forum topic to discuss is the personal experiences of the participants of language learning for the first time.

The Chat Room Module allows the participants to have meetings on the web to share ideas and give feedback to each other synchronously. Since the chat room relies on book print, additional online tools can be exploited for more effective communication. Other modules such as starting a workshop and using questionnaires are the accompanying modules the model borrows according to the requirements of the course given.

5. Conclusion

Moodle makes a perfect tool for professional development in terms of language teacher competencies. If used in the blended form and when combined with face-to face learning, it works well [17]. It is a fact that a language teacher is supposed to be equipped with pedagogical knowledge as well as content knowledge. The issue of pedagogical content knowledge [1] presents itself as the main concern for theoreticians and practitioners alike with the introduction of every new method or approach in English Language Teaching.



For this reason, this model aims to handle the issues in teaching as well as giving classroom application tips to help the language teacher in this controversial domain. As a distance education tool, it aims to provide a training package for the teachers, particularly the novice, so that they can gain insight into the teaching experience as well as keeping pace with the recent trends in education. The customizable features of the program for the organization, layout, content and modules, facilitate the practical use of the modules.

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