REACHING OUT: FACILITATING EFL LEARNING THROUGH EDMODO

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A B S T R A C T
The advent of virtual learning environments in the 21st century academic landscape has made learning English as a Foreign Language accessible and fascinating to students. This qualitative research aimed to shed light on how a virtual learning environment—Edmodo—facilitates learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Conducted at a technical college in the Sultanate of Oman during the third semester of Academic Year 2014-2015 until the first semester of Academic Year 2015-2016, this study elicited through interviews the perceptions of select Omani students on Edmodo as a virtual learning environment. The study revealed the Omani students' views on the strengths and weaknesses of Edmodo in facilitating EFL learning. It also unveiled the issues and challenges Omani students encountered while using Edmodo.

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Introduction

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) poses a number of challenges. Some of these challenges include communication anxiety and lack of autonomy among the EFL learners (Borg & Al Busaidi, 2011; Al-Mahrooqi & Khan, 2015; Jendli, 2007). Cognizant of these challenges encountered by students, learning EFL is difficult and challenging. Nonetheless, learning EFL may be made less difficult and less daunting with the help of teachers who are more than willing to extend a helping hand to their students. Nowadays, it is important that each teacher reaches out to students even beyond office hours to minimize their anxiety in learning EFL and to help them become responsible and independent learners. But the big question is: How should EFL teachers reach out to their students?

Integrating Technology in Education

Technology has become an inherent part of 21st century language education. The recent breakthroughs used in the academy have encouraged language teachers to more fully integrate technology into the teaching-learning process. As technology is considered effective in enhancing learning (Danielson, 2007), language teachers have within their reach unparalleled opportunities for teaching and learning, especially with the increasing availability of internet and mobile technologies (Tuzlukova, Al Busaidi, Coombe & Stojkovic, 2016).

The current boom of technological advancements used in the academy has opened new avenues for teachers to extend a helping hand to their students. As students nowadays have become so much engrossed in technology (i.e. Computers, tablets and smartphones) to "express their identity and make their voices heard"(Warner, 2013), teachers can now readily exploit such propensity not only to provide spontaneous learning opportunities (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2011) but also to extend a helping hand to EFL learners. One of the simplest ways to help and reach out to students is through social networking sites, which are easily accessible through smart phones.

With the impressive zeal educators and learners have for technology-based language education (Scully, 2008; Emerson & Tuzlukova, 2012; Al Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2013; Dayag, 2016), the academia may harness the inherent power of social networking sites like Edmodo to provide virtual learning environments that are accessible to EFL teachers and their students—wherever they are and whenever they want to. With the promising possibilities of mobile learning and virtual learning environments, language teachers have the golden opportunity to maximize the integration of technology inside and outside the classrooms to facilitate EFL learning.

Edmodo as a virtual learning environment

Virtual learning environment is a vogue in today's academic landscape. It is defined by O'Leary (2002, as cited by Morris and Rippin, 2003) as a particular form of eLearning technology that used networked computers to provide a range of functions to tutors, students and other users. Nowadays, virtual learning environment does not only facilitate learning, but also provides an avenue for educators to extend a helping hand to EFL students—wherever and whenever they want to learn. One of the most popular virtual learning environments that provide space for communication, collaboration and learning is Edmodo. The Teacher's Guide to Edmodo aptly shed light on the aim of this popular social learning platform:

"Edmodo empowers you to build relationships with your students in an environment they know and love, collaborate with other teachers to improve learning outcomes, and discover new resources that unlock the full potential of your classroom and your own professional development."

Founded by Nic Borg and Jeff O'Hara, Edmodo resembles Facebook, but unlike the most famous social networking site, it offers a more secure and safe virtual environment. Edmodo ensures privacy as only teachers can create and manage accounts; whereas, only their students, who receive a group code and register in the group, can access and join the group (Teacher's Guide to Edmodo, n.d.). As a virtual learning environment, Edmodo has the possibility of becoming an excellent tool that fosters learner autonomy in the 21st century learners as it can be effectively utilized by the teachers and students to communicate freely and promptly (Bayburtsyan, 2016).

Edmodo is accessible via web browser. Users can select a free Edmodo app for Windows, iOS or Android smartphones and tablets, so this social learning platform is accessible to teachers, students and parents anywhere. Students can easily join an Edmodo group if they know the authentic 'Group Code' that is exclusively shared by their teacher who owns and manages the online group. Wherever they are or whenever they like, students can check their Edmodo group to see their group's updates, such as: assignments, projects, teacher's notes, polls and quizzes. Besides, students receive notifications or alerts automatically sent to their email. Using their personal computer, students can comfortably work on their assignments and projects following their own pace and submit the soft copy of these academic requirements.

To be able to create a virtual learning environment through Edmodo, educators must sign up by creating a teacher account. Once they have signed up, teachers can easily create their online group which empowers them to invite group members, gauge student growth, monitor learning outcomes, and collaborate with other educators in their discipline (Teacher's Guide to Edmodo, n.d.). Teachers can upload quizzes, maintain a class calendar, conduct polls, as well as send notes and text messages alerts to individual students or to their entire class (Jarc, 2010). As well, teachers can share links of fascinating and informative videos and/or audios of EFL tutorials available on the web.

Considering the significant role of parents in the Academe, Edmodo included them in the loop by giving them "visibility into what's happening in the classroom" (Teacher's Guide to Edmodo, n.d.). Teachers can choose to involve the parents if they wish to seek the latter's guidance for their children or simply to give updates on their ward's academic development. As long as parents know the "Parent Code" (like a password), they are empowered to monitor their children as they have the option to view their children's assignments and due dates, and receive updates on class and school activities (Teacher's Guide to Edmodo, n.d.).

Studies about Edmodo

Though in-depth empirical studies about Edmodo are still limited, a number of recent researches hinted to the positive attributes of Edmodo being used by teachers in different academic contexts. Enriquez (2014) conducted a study among 200 college students in the Philippines to elicit the students' perspective on the effectiveness of Edmodo as a supplementary tool for learning social science courses. The study elicited qualitative and quantitative data through the conduct of interviews and administration of questionnaires. His study revealed that the majority of the participants considered Edmodo as an effective supplementary tool for their learning.

In Saudi Arabia, Al-Kathiri (2014) conducted an experimental research among 42 Saudi female secondary students to examine the possibility of integrating Edmodo into secondary school instruction. The study involved 42 subjects who were divided into two: experimental and control groups. The study found out that students' perceptions towards Edmodo were highly positive. Al-Kathiri concluded that the collaborative environment provided by Edmodo ensures that knowledge is shared and viewed transparently.

In another empirical study in Saudi Arabia, Al-Said (2015) delved on university undergraduate students' perception of Edmodo and mobile learning. Through a questionnaire, the researcher elicited quantitative data from 32 Edmodo users in their university. He found out that Saudi students have a positive perception of Edmodo as they thought that Edmodo promotes effective communication and participation.

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Meanwhile, Mustafa (2015) explored the perceptions of 55 Emirati college students on the use of Edmodo and applied Keller's Motivational Theory (2008 as cited in Mustafa, 2015) as theoretical framework. His qualitative research elicited the students' perception about Edmodo through the reflective journals required of them and analyzed the responses thematically. The study unveiled that students find Edmodo helpful and satisfying because it is accessible through smartphones and allows interaction between and among the students and their instructor.

In Thailand, Kongchan (2012) spearheaded a quantitative-qualitative study to unveil a teacher's, students' and other teachers' perceptions towards Edmodo. The study elicited data from a 57-year-old teacher, 81 students and 17 teachers by using three research instruments. The researcher found out that Edmodo is deemed to be "wonderful and user-friendly." In addition, the study ascertained that the learners are happy with Edmodo as a virtual learning environment.

In a descriptive study in a private university in Malaysia, Balasubramanian, Jaykumar & Fukey (2014) elicited the students' preference on Edmodo as a social platform used in education. The study administered a questionnaire—designed using the RASE (Resources, Activity, Support and Evaluation) model—to 249 students who are all Edmodo users. The results of the study revealed that Edmodo facilitates learning and fosters active participation among the students. Moreover, the study unveiled that students consider Edmodo as a "wonderful and user-friendly" virtual learning environment that enables them to enjoy their online class.

Focusing on the effect of Edmodo on mobile-assisted language learning, Bicen (2014) conducted a study at a university in Turkey by eliciting the opinions of students through a questionnaire. The results revealed that students deem Edmodo as an effective tool in foreign language learning. Furthermore, the study ascertained that students consider Edmodo as an entertaining learning environment that enables learners to enhance their language learning and improve their communication skills.

In the local context, Al Ruheili and Al Saidi (2015) looked into Omani students' perceptions of the usefulness and the challenges of integrating Edmodo into English classes. The researchers administered a questionnaire to 50 students from three different EFL classes in one of the colleges in the Sultanate of Oman. The results of the survey indicated that the students perceive Edmodo positively as they believe that it "enhanced and enriched students' learning experiences." As well, the results of the study indicated that Edmodo

motivates EFL learners and boosts their confidence in learning the target language. Meanwhile, the researchers indicated that further research studies should be carried within the Omani context to look closely into the dissimilar features of Edmodo as a learning program.

The Study in Context

The related literature reviewed in this paper provided sound evidence supporting the importance of technology in education, the relevance of teachers' initiatives in reaching out to students, and the significance of Edmodo in facilitating EFL learning. Despite all the recent studies—either qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of both—established that students from different contexts perceived Edmodo positively, none of the studies delved into the prime users' perspective on the weaknesses of Edmodo in facilitating EFL learning. Once revealed, these shall help EFL lecturers in improving their students' virtual learning environment. In general, this qualitative study was conducted to address the pressing imperative: How do Omani students perceive Edmodo as a virtual learning environment, particularly in terms of fostering EFL learning?

Statement of the Problem

The study aimed to ascertain the perceptions of select Omani students on Edmodo as a virtual learning environment. Specifically, it endeavored to shed light on the following:

1. How do the informants perceive Edmodo as a virtual learning environment?
2. What are the informants' views on the strengths of Edmodo?
3. What are the informants' views on the weaknesses of Edmodo?
4. What issues/ challenges have the informants encountered while using Edmodo?

Significance of the Study

The study will be beneficial to EFL lecturers and educational leaders. The results of this study will help EFL teachers in harnessing the power of Edmodo as a virtual learning environment, specifically to facilitate EFL learning through their learner-friendly Edmodo groups. Moreover, the results will be beneficial to educational leaders in terms of coming up with definitive policies on the creation and promotion of virtual learning environments like Edmodo to foster EFL learning, to motivate students to communicate in English, to encourage active participation, and to develop learner autonomy among students.

Methodology

This qualitative research was conducted in the Shinas College of Technology (ShCT), Sultanate of Oman during the third semester of Academic Year 2014-2015 until the first semester of Academic Year 2015-2016. Research participants include a total of 40 EFL students—comprised of 23 female and 17 male students; with ages normally ranging from 19 and 21 years. All the research participants were studying EFL under ShCT's Foundation Program and were active members of Edmodo group/s during the conduct of the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to encourage the informants to freely offer their insights and opinions on Edmodo as a virtual learning environment. The semi-structured interviews were then recorded and transcribed. To unveil the common themes, patterns, concepts, insights and understandings (Patton, 2002), the qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Limitations of the study include the following: a) results of this study do not provide conclusive evidence on the effectiveness of Edmodo as a virtual learning environment because the study just elicited the students' perceptions and did not include other factors like teachers' insights and opinions; and, b) the insights and opinions of the informants were predominantly based on their actual use of Edmodo between May and November 2015 (the months during which the interviews were conducted); hence, their insights and opinions may no longer be the same if the study were to be conducted again.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative data indicated that the informants generally have a positive impression on Edmodo as a virtual learning environment that facilitates EFL learning. The informants claimed that Edmodo is a commendable virtual learning environment because it is perceived to foster EFL learning, communication, learner autonomy and participation among students. This finding supports the claim of recent studies (Enriquez, 2014; Al-Said, 2015; Al Kathiri, 2015; Al Ruheili & Al Saidi, 2015) that students deem Edmodo as a good social learning platform which complements classroom-based learning.

Strengths of Edmodo

From the vantage point of the key informants, Edmodo has four strengths as a virtual learning environment. These strengths include:

1. Edmodo is perceived to have a positive effect on students' communication and participation. To exemplify, some of the statements elicited from the informants include: "I can communicate with my English teacher anytime;" " Edmodo is a good app for learning because it motivates me to use English, especially if I send messages to my teacher;" "I can use Edmodo to keep in touch with my English teacher, especially if I have questions about my projects or homework;" "Through our Edmodo group, I can easily reach my teacher even outside the classroom;" and "it helps us a lot as it reminds us of our obligations like homework and projects." This finding reinforces the claims of related studies (Al-Said, 2014; Bicen, 2014; Al Kathiri, 2015; Mustafa, 2015; and Al Ruheili & Al-Saidi, 2015) that Edmodo develops students' communication skills and promotes active participation as it encourages interaction between the teacher and his/her students. Through Edmodo, students (even the shy ones) are given the opportunity to communicate with their EFL teacher whenever they want to raise questions, ask for clarifications, or follow up anything related to their course.

2. Edmodo facilitates EFL learning. This is manifest in the following responses: "it helps me a lot in learning English;" "Our Edmodo group is good. It makes learning English fun;" "Through the teaching materials posted by our teacher in Edmodo, I can review my lessons in English at home;" "it is a good app for learning;" and "the videos and reading materials shared in Edmodo make learning English more interesting." Previous studies (Enriquez, 2014; Balasubramanian, Jaykumar & Fukey, 2014; Al-Said, 2015; Al Kathiri, 2015; and Al Ruheili & Al-Saidi, 2015) shed some light on the pivotal role Edmodo plays in facilitating the assimilation of the target language. As Balasubramanian, Jaykumar and Fukey (2014) asserted, Edmodo promotes learning among students as they enjoy navigating through this virtual learning environment. It can also be inferred that since Edmodo allows the sharing of instructional videos and audio clips, interested students are provided with authentic exposure to the target language. This genuine exposure to English goes a long way as students have unlimited time to view and benefit from rich Youtube learning resources as long as they have intenet connection. Such genuine exposure to English facilitates learning EFL in an informal manner, which is due to the use of Edmodo outside the confines of the classroom and beyond college hours.

3. Edmodo makes them more independent and responsible. Some of the informants' responses are the following: "I can learn English using Edmodo;" "With the notifications sent to my email, Edmodo helps me recall my homework and projects so I can do these at home and submit promptly;" " It helps me a lot in learning English, " and "I can use it to communicate with my teacher even outside the class." This finding is underscored in a number of significant studies (Enriquez, 2014; Balasubramanian, Jaykumar & Fukey, 2014; and Al Ruheili & Al-Saidi, 2015). Indeed, Edmodo promotes learner autonomy as it empowers EFL learners to become more responsible (and, in the long run, more accountable) of their intellectual growth, particularly in the domain of EFL learning.

4. Edmodo makes learning EFL enjoyable. Most of the key informants stated that they have fun in their Edmodo groups. "My unique and exclusive Edmodo group usually has many web pages and internet resources like English learning tutorial videos." This affirms the finding of Kongchan (2012), Bicen (2014), and Mustafa (2015) in their earlier studies that Edmodo makes learning fun as the social learning platform has fascinating features. While it is true that learning EFL is difficult and challenging, especially for students in the Foundation program, the interesting features of Edmodo as a virtual learning environment—like polls and quizzes—give delight to students who enjoy sharing their insights or ideas on relevant topics related to their EFL learning.

Weaknesses of Edmodo

Edmodo is perceived by the key informants to have weaknesses as a virtual learning environment. The key informants identified the following common demerits of this virtual learning environment:

1. Difficulty to join a group or open an account. Some key informants claimed that it is relatively difficult to join an Edmodo group. To exemplify, some responses include "it is difficult to use," "the passcode keeps on changing;" and "it takes time to create an account and participate in a group." With much prodding, an informant attributed this issue to the required passcode that is shared by the teacher, the owner of their class's Edmodo group. If a student fails to remember the unique

passcode, he/she cannot join the prospective group he/she wants to register in.

2. Promptness of replies depends on the teacher's frequency and regularity of moderating the students' replies. Informants identified moderation as one of Edmodo's weaknesses. The informants perceived the delay in response as a demerit because they did not know that the replies have to undergo filtering or moderation, which is solely done by the teacher. This weakness is exemplified by the informants' responses: "no instant replies," "answers take much time," 'Sometimes, the links on the Internet learning resources I shared are not easily seen in the group's wall," and "some of my feedback are not shown on the wall." Cognizant of the perception or beliefs of the students on the moderation of their Edmodo posts, EFL teachers must clearly and tactfully explain to the learners the rationale of moderation.

3. Limited interaction among the students. According to the key informants, they felt that Edmodo provides limited interaction among the students. As one informant put it: "Edmodo is not as good as Whatsapp because in Whatsapp I can reply and talk to my classmates anytime I like." The moderation feature is at the forefront of this belief among the students, especially the unabashed male students. Considering the local context and the conservative culture of Omani students, the moderation feature makes Edmodo as a safe and secured virtual learning environment where students cannot simply interact with their classmates from the opposite gender. Hence, this perceived weakness of Edmodo is simply seen as a safety net for teachers who would like to promote interaction and communication among the users but not to the extent of disregarding the students' culture.

Challenges encountered

Some challenges encountered by the informants while using Edmodo include the following: delayed reply and difficulty of logging in due to weak internet connection. Regarding the delayed reply, it must be underscored that students cannot simply reply and/or upload links of videos and audio clips if the teacher tapped the moderation feature of this virtual learning environment. As one informant articulated: "Sometimes students cannot reply." Hence, the promptness of replies depends on the teacher's frequency and regularity of moderating the students' replies. It means that the busier the

instructor, the more the approval for uploading of the replies gets delayed.

Another challenge encountered by the informants is difficult to log in. To exemplify, some responses include "it is hard to log in and submit our requirements through Edmodo," and "homeworks and projects can only be uploaded through the Windows version of the app." This view from some informants emanated from their actual experience of using Edmodo's mobile version using the College's free WiFi service. It must be noted that when some of the interviews were conducted, there were frequent disruptions on the free WiFi connection with the college. As any mobile app that is dependent on the strength of the smartphone's internet connection, Edmodo takes time to open, so it would follow that logging in is time-consuming whenever the internet connection is weak.

Conclusion

Reaching out to Omani EFL students is convenient and faster by creating virtual learning environments through Edmodo. By maintaining an active Edmodo group, EFL teachers can easily reach out to their students, particularly to help them learn English better, to enrich their learning experiences and to promote learner independence. Omani students deemed Edmodo as a helpful virtual learning environment as it facilitates EFL learning by offering them opportunities to become more independent, dynamic and participative. They expressed a positive perception of Edmodo as they felt that it promotes learner autonomy, provides students' genuine exposure to the English language, and creates a non-threatening language learning atmosphere.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on the findings of this study:

1.) EFL lecturers should reach out to their students by creating and managing virtual learning environments like Edmodo groups;

2.) Considering the Omani context, EFL lecturers should create separate groups for each gender to avoid inhibitions among the students, particularly in terms of their reaction, feedback or questions;

3.) EFL lecturers should be judicious in giving homework and project through Edmodo, especially if some students do not have internet access at home.

4. EFL teachers must encourage their students communicate (in English) with the whole group or to their teacher through Edmodo in order to enhance their communication skills and boost their confidence in speaking the foreign language.

5. EFL teachers and educational leaders must tap the students' positive perception of Edmodo as a virtual

learning environment in order to promote learner autonomy and to enhance students' communication skills.

6. Educational leaders should pass definitive policies on the creation and maintenance of virtual learning environments like Edmodo in order to facilitate the delivery of quality foreign language education in their midst.

7. Students must be encouraged to join their class's Edmodo group or virtual learning environment in order to foster learner independence and collaboration.

8. EFL lecturers should harness the power of Edmodo as a supplementary tool for EFL learning, by maximizing the use of Edmodo's interesting features like conducting polls, uploading online quizzes, and sharing digital resources.

9. Future research endeavors should be conducted to explore the effectiveness of the advance features of Edmodo like assessment automation, customizing learning outcomes and monitoring learning outcomes.

10. Future research endeavors should be conducted to elicit the perspective of EFL teachers and educational leaders in order to corroborate the findings of this study.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

A. *Student's Perceptions on Edmodo*

1. *Do you like using Edmodo as a virtual learning environment? Why or why not?*

B. *Strengths*

1. *Considering your actual use of Edmodo, what do you like most in this social learning platform?*
2. *In your opinion, does Edmodo help you as a student? Why or why not?*
3. *Does Edmodo help you in learning English as a Foreign Language? If yes, in what way/s?*

C. *Weaknesses*

1. *What do you like least in this virtual learning environment?*
2. *Which of the features of Edmodo do you want to be changed? Why?*

D. *Issues/Challenges*

1. What problems have you encountered while using Edmodo?
2. Is there anything you want to be improved in your Edmodo group?s