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Relevance of E-learning for the teaching of English

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ABSTRACT

E-learning has become an integral component of modern education system. Thus, in order to make teaching-learning effective and result oriented, various e-learning systems and strategies have been developed. In a modern cyber society like ours, updates of knowledge are on full swing. Continuing education and lifelong/social education has accordingly emerged. As a solution to these new education forms and demands, it is proposed to employ a novel e-learning mode, i.e. web-based self-learning, hybrid or blended learning in the existing educational system of all the modern colleges in Saudi Arabia where the infrastructural and other resources are very much accessible. In this research, the paper is intended to assess the relevance of e-learning programs/courses in the department of preparatory year of Jeddah Community College (JCC). While exploring the need and importance of e-learning resources/tools, the following aspects will also be taken into account: feasibilities, types, availability of e-learning tools/resources, and teacher development etc. English language is the main focus for the simple reason that the electronic resources are developed mostly in English and it is the medium of the instruction/examination apart from being the foundation of speciality programs offered at the college. It has been generally found that the modern learners are not much attracted towards the traditional mode of learning. Instead, they would like to choose a learning mode as a fun (such as gaming) which is without any burden and bindings. In this case, distance learning or blended learning mode will be quite useful. Moreover, young Saudi generation is quite friendly with computers, net and sophisticated mode of communication. Therefore, e-leaning is expected to de-burden the 21stentury Saudi learners as the system is easy to access anywhere and anytime.

Introduction

E-learning can operationally be defined as the use, delivery and achievement of learning, training or education by all electronic means. E-learning involves the use of a computer or other electronic device (like a mobile phone) in one way or the other to provide training, educational or learning material. (Derek Stockley, 2003). E-learning can also involve a greater variety of equipment than online training or education as it is not limited to the use of online learning which involves using the Internet or an Intranet process. It can even involve an English language lab which used uploaded software and not connected to the net. However, if the lab is connected to the net it becomes more useful and update.

E-learning comprises all forms of electronically supported learning and teaching. The information and communication systems, whether networked learning or not, serve as specific media to implement the learning process.(Tavangarian et al ,2004).

Thus, E-learning is basically the computer and net supported knowledge or skills. E-learning applications and processes include Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual education opportunities and digitally supported educational system.

Distance education provided the base for e-learning's development. E-learning can be available on demand and open to access. It overcomes timing, attendance and other issues such as facing the crowded buses, traffic or even mental worries. e-Learning is nothing but the use of technology to enable modern learners to be able to learn anytime and anywhere. e-Learning can include training, the delivery of just-in-time information and guidance from online available experts.

Utilisation of e-learning services

E-learning services started with the emergence of the computer need in the system of education. There is a trend to move towards blended learning services, where computer-based activities are integrated with normal classroom-learning situations. (Bates and Poole, 2003 and Bates, 2005). OECD(2005) suggest that different modes or forms of e-learning can be considered as a continuum, from no e-learning (use of computers, net etc) to the active utilisation of laptop for PowerPoint presentations and online teaching.

It can be seen then that e-learning can describe a wide range of applications, and it is often by no means clear even in peer reviewed research publications which form of e-learning is being discussed.(Lowenthal et al 2009).However, Bates and Poole (2003) argue that when instructors say they are using e-learning, this most often refers to the use of technology as classroom aids.

Computer-based learning

Computer-based learning (CBL) refers to the use of computers as a key component of the educational environment. While this can refer to the use of computers in a classroom, the term more broadly refers to a structured environment in which computers are used for teaching purposes.

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Whyte (1989) researched about the ever increasing role that computers would play in higher education. This evolution, to include computer-supported collaborative learning, in addition to data management, has been realized. The type of computers have changed over the years from cumbersome, slow devices taking up much space in the classroom, home, and office to laptops and handheld devices that are more portable in form and size ,and such technology devices will continue.

It is widely agreed to distinguish collaborative learning from the traditional 'direct transfer' model in which the instructor is assumed to be the distributor of knowledge and skills, which is often given the neologism E-Learning 1.0, even though this direct transfer method most accurately reflects Computer-Based Learning systems (CBL).

Whyte opines, 'the continuing attention to aspects of motivation and success in regard to E-learning should be kept in context and concert with other educational efforts'. Information about motivational tendencies can help educators, psychologists, and technologists develop insights to help students perform better academically.(Whyte and Lauridsen1980).

Technology issues

The terms like learning technology, instructional technology, and Educational Technology are often used alternatively. These generally are used to refer to the use of technology in learning in a much broader sense than the computer-based training or Computer Aided Instruction of the 1980s. It is also broader than the terms Online Learning or Online Education which generally refer to purely web-based learning. In cases where mobile technologies are used, the term M-learning has become more common. However, the proper use of such a tool has to be well chalked out before its implementation in the e-learning process.

E-learning is naturally suited to distance learning and flexible learning, but can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching, in which case the term Blended learning is commonly used. One of the pioneers of E-Learning, Bernard Luskin argues that the "E" must be understood to have broad meaning if e-Learning is to be effective. He further adds that the "e" should be interpreted to mean exciting, energetic, enthusiastic, emotional, extended, excellent, and educational in addition to "electronic" that is a traditional interpretation. This broader interpretation allows for 21st century applications and brings learning and media psychology into the equation.(www.aisystems.ch/elearn/)

Relevance of e-learning

In higher education especially, the increasing tendency is to create a Virtual Learning Environment in which all aspects of a course are handled through a consistent user interface of an institution. A growing number of face to face institutions/universities, as well as newer online colleges/institutes, have begun to offer various vocational and academic degrees/diplomas/ certificates through Internet at different levels for multi-disciplines. While some programs require students to attend some campus classes or theoretical orientations, and the rest are provided online.

E-Learning can also refer to educational web sites such as those offering classroom activities, home assignments, worksheets and interesting exercises for children that the learners can complete on their own.

Different modes of E-learning:

E-learning can be used in educational system in many ways. As a matter of importance of incorporating e-learning strategies into formal educational system, many approaches/techniques have been recommended from time to time. The following are a few that are quite relevant in a particular educational setting.

Blended learning

It is a concept which is of quite recent origin. It is nice amalgam of formal teaching/learning mode with distance/e-learning strategies in order to facilitate the target learner. Some particular examples of blended learning benefits include an increase in the number of students feeling and an increase in student support and consequently improved student retention rates (Hughes, 2007).

Self learning

The novel idea of 'self-learning' received due attention recently. In a place like the UK, such educational concepts are very much in use. Both the teachers/guides and the students usually interact via mail. Classroom teaching has become little passive, however its importance can never be minimised for many genuine reasons. With the further research on it and the building of learning objects repository, the knowledge frame based learning strategy has been implemented in GSL. (Hao,2004).

Devices like Communication technologies are generally employed which categorized as asynchronous or synchronous activities. Asynchronous activities use technologies such as blogs, wikis, and discussion boards. The idea here is that participants may engage in the exchange of ideas or information without the dependency of other participants' involvement at the same time. Asynchronous learning also gives students the ability to work at their own pace. This is particularly beneficial for students who have health problems or not able to face the torture of journeys or unmanageable crowd. They have the opportunity to complete their work in a low stress environment or may be a friendly environment.

Synchronous activities involve the exchange of ideas and information with one or more participants during the same period of time. A face to face discussion is an example of synchronous communications. Synchronous activities occur with all participants joining in at once, as with an online chat session or a virtual classroom or meeting.

Virtual classrooms and face to face interaction can often use a blend of communication technologies. Virtual Students are able to 'write on the board' and even share their desktop, when given rights by the teacher. Some other communication technologies employed in a virtual classroom include: text notes, microphones, and breakout sessions (working in a small group).

In many virtual models, the writing community (group of people involved) and the communication channels relate with the E-learning and the M-learning communities. Both the communities provide a general overview of the basic learning models and the activities required for the participant learners to join the learning sessions throughout the virtual classroom.

Personalized learning:

It is a personalized-based unique learning mode reflecting differences in learners. Personalized learning has always been the burning research issues in the area of E-learning throughout the recent past. In E-learning, the following issues are emphasized: individual differences such as capacities, learning background, learning styles, learning objectives, and the changing states of individual knowledge in learning process. So E-learning in these trends attempt to provide a personalized learning which includes personalised material, personalised objectives and personalised process (Hongchi Shi et.al, 2002).

Learning management system

Learning management system (LMS) is software used for delivering, tracking and managing training/education. LMSs range from systems for managing training/educational records to software for distributing courses over the Internet and offering features for online collaboration.

A LMS allows for teachers and administrators to track attendance, time on task, and student progress. LMS also allows for not only teachers and administrators to track these variables but parents and students as well. Parents can log on to the LMS to record grades. Students log on to the LMS to submit homework and to access the course syllabus and lessons.

Computer-based assessment and evaluation

Computer-aided Assessment is a necessity for modern institutions. It may range from multiple-choice tests to any other type of assessment. Computers can help in getting feedback regarding student's specific mistakes and even rectify those mistakes in no time.

The best examples follow a Formative Assessment structure and are called "Online Formative Assessment". This involves making an initial formative assessment by pointing out the incorrect answers. The author/teacher will then explain what the pupil should have done with each question. It will then give the pupil to practice those items that were pointed out as wrong by the system. This is the formative learning stage. The next stage is to make a Summative Assessment by a new set of questions only covering the topics previously taught. In this case also, computers can be proved to be very useful provide these are employed suitably by well trained instructor.

Pedagogical considerations

There are many Pedagogical considerations that a teacher/mentor has to keep in his mind while using e-learning devices/tools. For example, e-learning could be used as a lesson, an assignment, a multiple choice question, a quiz, a discussion group or a case study. Although it may be in any of the following methods, pedagogical structures would not include a textbook, a web page, or a video conference.

When beginning to create E-Learning content, the pedagogical approaches need to be evaluated. Simple pedagogical approaches make it easy to create content, but lack flexibility, richness and downstream functionality. On the other hand, complex pedagogical approaches can be difficult to set up and slow to develop, though they have the potential to provide more engaging learning experiences for students. Somewhere between these extremes is an ideal pedagogy that allows a particular educator to effectively create educational materials suitable for the target students.

Theoretical perspectives and e-learning scenario

It is possible to use various pedagogical approaches for e-Learning which include:

social-constructivist – this pedagogy is particularly well afforded by the use of discussion forums, blogs, wiki and on-line collaborative activities. It is a collaborative approach that opens educational content creation to a wider group including the students themselves. The One Laptop Per Child Foundation described the use of a constructivist approach. E-moderating: Cognitive perspective focuses on the processes involved in learning as well as how the brain works.(Bloom and Krathwohl,1956). The field of CSCL is fruitful, with many prototypes and application systems having been developed. From the perspective of a distributed computing environment, four different architectures of CSCL were proposed which include: centralized architecture, replicated architecture, distributed architecture and hybrid architecture (D.Suthers, 2001).

The Case of Jeddah Community College:

Jeddah community college is one of the pioneer colleges of Saudi Arabia which got accredited by COE, USA. Recently, it accomplished the implementation of Electronic Management Education System (EMES)- the preferred Electronic system of the King Abdul Aziz University Jeddah. The college successfully arranged training sessions for the concerned staff of the Jeddah community college. Later, the courses (approximately 120 as a whole) were put online to facilitate the enrolled students as well as the future distance learning students. The college has been ready for such sophisticated changed the time accreditation process started some 2 years ago. To mention about the infrastructural facilities, the following are the main achievements:

- computer based classroom teaching,
-internet facility in each classroom, offices etc
-modern language labs,
-expansion of computer labs,
-computers installation for the students,
-provision of an e-learning supervisor to look after the development etc.

Regarding the online material related o English curriculum, the entire material was put on the website. The focus was on the learning/assessment activities such as CYU (Check Your Understanding), Crossword puzzle, power points etc.

The assignment are put online through university website with a deadline. A separate ‘forum’ has been created to discuss issues. In addition, online chatting facility has also been created to catch the attention of the e-learners of the Jeddah community college, and restore their motivation level which is really a crucial issue.

It is expected that such web based material, mass media and high tech programs of education are going to exert some major impact on the attitude and motivation of the formal as well as non-formal students (learning through distance mode).

The most important features of the e-learning are:

1-easy and load free,
2- interesting,
3- open access: any time-anywhere,
4- varied information,
5- self- learning mode,
6-self motivating,

The idea of incorporating e-learning in the classrooms in general and English classrooms in particular was basically derived from the following hypotheses:

1- E-learning is very important in the learning in general and learning of English in particular,
2- The available e- resource is compatible and up to date,
3- The EMES as a tool is very useful,
4- There is a need to evolve learning strategies in general,
5- Teachers of JCC are well prepared to implement e-learning,
6- Self- learning package is expected to yield much better results.

It is expected that he present modest attempt and its result is going to be utilized not only in the community college Jeddah or other community colleges in a country like Saudi, but also by those technical colleges that are more or less like community colleges where other subjects in general and Intensive English in particular, are taught in the foundation year. Thus, modern and

sophisticated mode of imparting education in general is always a crucial issue. There has always been a debate over the issues like traditional teaching/learning and innovative strategies. In this connection, e- learning will prove to be a landmark technique to facilitate the learners in a strategic manner and achieve the targets of teaching in general and language teaching/learning in particular.

Teaching of English and E-Learning at JCC:

Teaching of English at Jeddah community college is mostly based on e-learning tools/resources. As the classrooms have net connections along with power point accessories, most teachers utilise the e-learning facilities. It helps the teachers to provide information on demand and the learners to be motivated to learn new things.

In an English class, the following steps are usually taken while imparting knowledge:

-Reading,
-Listening,
-Sound and drill,
-meaning and contextual use,
-spelling,
-grammatical function,
-brainstorming/conferencing for comprehension,
-evaluation,
-home work,
-feedback etc

Let's start with reading skill. There are two standard ways of teaching reading:

Reading aloud by the teacher or the playing of a CD. A well recorded CD will prove to be a better way to teach the reading basically because of the fact that it has the native sound. However, a follow up by the teacher concerned is always a better strategy. When a teacher reads, he asks the learner to read in more or less similar way. The students' voice can also be recorded to find out the mistakes if any. The student himself can do so.

Later, the sound of a particular word is taught especially those which are new and difficult. In order to teach the actual sound and stress pattern, most teachers use website such as dictionary.com to drill the sound. Regarding meaning and the contextual use, again on line resources are utilised by the teacher as there is a net connection in all the classrooms. In the case of spelling errors, again computers and websites are used to teach the spelling system. In the same way, grammatical functions are also taught through available material on different websites. In order to check the comprehension orally brainstorming or conferencing is another useful means. CYU (Crossword puzzles) are ready on EMES system to check one's comprehension. It can also be checked by true or false or filling the blanks items via EMES system. Evaluation and homework can be done through EMES again, and if there is any difficulties, the students can chat online or discuss through forum of the EMES system.

In this way, at every stage of teaching English, the e-learning resources and tools are utilised by the JCC teachers and learners. Each and every item of English language has been well linked to the on line learning or e-learning mode which are highly relevant in the modern educational set up Saudi in particular.

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