VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR ESL COURSES

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Abstract: As the time in which online teaching and learning was still an element of novelty has long been gone, virtual learning environments have to be studied thoroughly so that they will provide students not only with the necessary knowledge, but also with the proper tools to meet their learning objectives. The advancement in information technology and the access to an almost inordinate number of learning and teaching tools should have already been fructified and, as a result, not only teachers, but also learners should have already picked up the fruit of knowledge grown in the vast virtual environment of the Internet. However, as education has recently moved almost entirely online, some questions have arisen. Are the Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) enough to offer ESL students both motivation and knowledge? Will foreign languages benefit from this growing trend or will traditional, face-to-face interaction, prove to have been more efficient? The present article will look into some of these questions and into the benefits of VLEs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: ESL; VLE; LMS; language teaching; language learning.

Introduction

For many years, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have been considered not only as a sign of teaching and learning stepping into the new millennium, but also as a leapfrog in terms of shaping the new human being. VLEs are defined as a virtual place/space related to an institution/course where information is provided in different forms (ranging from text to complex 3D representations) by different users, who can be teachers, students, researchers, practitioners, etc., having or not the support of traditional face-to-face courses and including a number of heterogenous technologies and approaches[1].

VLEs have an arborescent structure coming from their development and their multiple contributors and bear some of the advantages of the more systematized and focused e-learning course and virtual campuses. However, the main difference between VLEs and the aforementioned types of online education is that VLEs offer only chunks of information that can be used to supplement the information coming from other areas while e-learning and the virtual campus are based on a preestablished, institutionalized curricula, benefitting from professional course design consisting of clear objectives, teaching methods, materials to meet the needs of a certain group of students on a certain topic.

In other words, VLEs are libraries developed by users/teachers/learners in which students may or may not find information on a specific topic if it outside the scope of a specific course provided by an organization (school, university, etc.).

VLEs have been often compared to LMS even if there is a difference between them in terms of the tools used. The same as the VLE, the LMS comes as both free and open-source software, located on platforms used by institutions to develop courses for the purpose of training personnel in different areas with a minimum of effort and cost. On the flipside, VLEs use tools to aggregate information needed for a specific course that could include also e-learning courses without being reduced only to these, its main focus being, however, on education not on training. The difference between the two is in the way they are used stressing the fact that education is more focused on the acquisition of knowledge while training is related to following procedures and accreditation[2], assets which make it popular with the business sector.

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[1] Pierre Dillenbourg, Daniel Schneider, Paraskevi Synteta, *Virtual Learning Environments*, 3rd Hellenic Conference "Information & Communication Technologies in Education", 2002, Rhodes, Greece, pp. 3-4, ffhal-00190701f.

[2] R. Pinner (2011), *VLE or LMS: Taxonomy for Online Learning Environments. IATEFL Learning Technologies SIG Newsletter,* CALL review, Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281832781_VLE_or_LMS_Taxonomy_for_Online_Learning_Environments.

VLEs the same as Personal Learning Environments (PLEs), another modern form of organizing knowledge, have appeared from the need of teachers/learners to benefit from a system that provided access to different learning resources anytime and anyplace the difference being that a PLE is a single user's e-learning system serving a more user-based purpose. Still, as VLEs come in different shapes and scopes, they will also serve different purposes. VLEs platforms are built as an immersive teaching and learning environment aggregating different tools to form one huge learning space that can be adapted to the needs of different groups of teachers/learners.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 and the adoption of social distancing, traditional face-to-face courses have become unavailable in many areas and new web-based variants to them had to be adopted. It is an endeavor most institutions, educators and students have found it difficult to master even if online courses of different types have been around for decades. The current situation, though, has unearthed a fact that has been sometimes disregarded in the conquest of the virtual space: human face-to-face interaction still plays a significant role in education than some people were willing to accept.

VLEs for English as a Second Language (ESL)

The recent outbreak of coronavirus disease has disrupted the normal course of events at a global scale having repercussions in many areas, including the educational field due to a number of factors:

- the teaching staff may be from the categories of age that are likely to be affected by Covid-19 registering more severe forms[3];
- the illness of teachers may affect hundreds of students if they are unable to attend classes due to their condition;
- students may be vectors of spreading the disease even if they do not register sever cases;
- students will have to rely only on online courses and resources;
- teachers will have to provide only online resources.

It is clear that both students and teachers had to adapt rapidly to the current state some of them without prior preparation. Even if tertiary education was more prepared to go totally online as most universities worldwide had already developed learning platforms and e-learning courses, this was not the case for all forms of education and all types of courses. In the case of ESL (English as a Second Language), the problems encountered were similar to others subjects and in the absence of e-learning courses that had been designed prior to the pandemic, VLEs provided useful tools for both teachers and learners of English. As the pandemic has left little time to prepare, teachers found themselves in the position to adapt not only to the online teaching environment, but also to supply activities for the courses that used to be face-to-face. Therefore, the VLE became a safe and useful space where teachers could upload several teaching activities/assessment tools and aggregate them in a coherent way in the absence of actual e-learning courses designed for each level of English study.

Online ESL teaching and learning seemed to benefit from this rapid change having the advantage of the multitude of online resources. Actually, English classes performed with premade courses, activities, materials that were online came with multiple possibilities to approach the language and practice it. Since a foreign language means communication and understanding/interpretation of meaning and context, the virtual environment offered all these in addition to a new perspective. Furthermore, the online activities, due to their more modern presentation (video, interactive content) encouraged students to spend more time to work on their own so their interest seemed greater than when dealing with printed materials[4].

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[3] Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the EU/EEA and the UK https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19-rapid-risk-assessment-20200810.pdf

[4] R.J. Blake (2011), *Current Trends in Online Language Learning*, Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 31:19 – 35, p. 21.

Developing the receptive and productive skills

Teaching foreign languages means developing receptive and productive skills, each of them with its own set of goals, tools and activities designed to provide students with the desired level of comprehension in ESL.

The receptive skills involve the extraction of information to serve different purposes from the spoken and written discourse that could be provided via VLEs as a form of practice:

- Reading/listening to learn new vocabulary;
- Reading/listening to understand the main idea of a text;
- Reading/listening for specific information;
- Reading/listening for detailed comprehension including the ability to evaluate the credibility, the intended reasons of a speaker/author.

Some of these skills and subskills can be developed online also using the materials posted on a VLE even in the absence of a predesigned course if the teacher has clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the face-to-face course and is capable of transferring them to the online environment. So, reading and listening can be easily taught and practiced using the tools and materials from the VLE.

VLE provides the possibility, the same as the more business-centered LMS, to put all the resources in one place, being less used as LMS to create content, but more to provide supplementary activities. So, a VLE for an ESL course will offer the following interaction:

- Sharing resources – documents/links to other resources;
- Providing a cooperative working space;
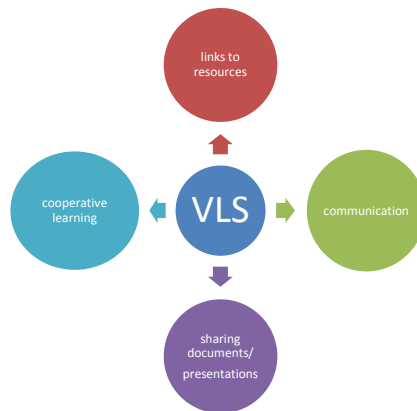- Managing homework and feedback;
- Communicating with students.

Figure 1. VLE classroom

However, even if students bring their contribution to a VLE, they will not be in control of it as this environment is controlled by the institution and the teachers in charge with the course. As a result, a VLE is more static, authority-based and declarative[5] due to restrictions coming from:

- The content and format of the course;
- The teachers;
- The students;
- The institution.

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[5] S. Downes (2010), *Personal Learning Environments,* https://www.downes.ca/files/Personal%20Learning%20Environments.pdf

The productive skills, writing and speaking, will only partially benefit from the VLE as speaking is particularly dependent upon face-to-face interaction. Still, due to its characteristics, writing is more prone to being performed online through activities that would encourage students to cooperate in order to perform a certain task. There is a number of cooperative writing activities that can also be performed online and which will involve groups of students such as: exchanging emails, messages, writing blog posts, essays, article, news reports, etc. In addition, teachers can use the virtual environment to post issues that will be discussed online by the participants or will involve them in activities such as:

- **Forums** are used by teachers to give clarifications, post announcements, but also by students to ask for resources, solve problems or simply communicate with their peers. Forums are considered useful tools to develop the cognitive dimension and the ability to reason[6];
- **Annotations** may use the features provided by Wikipedia to create or modify content subsequently encouraging participants to collaborate and review their entries;
- **Blogs** will also promote collaboration among students in order to post entries related to an issue;
- **Social media** are used to communicate or to post as part of a project.

The speaking skill, due to its interactive nature, may only partially benefit from online interaction than from the face-to-face one. However, even if everyday communication is indeed face-to-face, there are other forms that are performed online and which will benefit more from it such as conferences, dialogues over the phone/online, etc. It is thus important in order to develop the productive skills not to use the VLEs as a static space where students only receive activities and feedback, but as a dynamical one in which they bring their contribution and communicate. The actual act of communication, which comes naturally in face-to-face interaction, may be disregarded or misused in the online one. Communication between participants is of utmost importance, but at the same time it may hide some of the reasons behind the lack of motivation. In the case of ESL online courses, demotivation may come from the fact that they do not provide sufficient interaction especially when it comes to the productive skills.

Figure 2. Activities for developing productive skills

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[6] M. Biasutti, (2017), *A comparative analysis of forums and wikis as tools for online collaborative learning*, Computers & Education, Volume 111, pp. 158-171.

Foreign languages tend to benefit from this growing trend of using VLEs for teaching and learning and the results seem to be similar to those provided by face-to-face interaction for most skills. However, in order to avoid students' lack of motivation and to provide more practice, a number of learning activities can be used for both productive and receptive skills:

- independent learning in which the student has to research a topic/write a project with the teacher's support;
- group tutorials in which learning takes place in small groups with the assistance of a tutore;
- work-related experience in which the virtual class will simulate the realities of an actual work space through specific activities: conferences, reports, debate, etc.
- problem-solving learning in which students are in a situation to solve a problem for instance a survival activity;
- collaborative learning in which students collaborate on a task;
- blended learning in which the VLE also includes face-to-face activities.

Among the most used platforms for VLE and ESL classes are Moodle, Edmodo, Frog VLE and Google Classroom, each of them coming with both free and paid resources. They all come with an offer that includes several tools for collaboration, interaction, and assessment both formative and summative, but also for organizing the activities such as calendars or timetables that will announce students regarding their participation in online/offline events, submission of homework and evaluation.

Conclusion

Virtual Learning Environments aggregate the online or offline resources of one or more courses of an institution so that they will be in one place and easy to access. VLEs are organization-based and mirror the curricula of a specific institution in contrast to the PLEs, which are personal and mirror learner's needs and interests. However, even if VLEs are dependent upon the materials and activities decided by teachers, they should promote communication and collaboration between learners through a number of activities that are meant to improve both the receptive and the productive skills of the participants to an ESL course. If materials aggregated in a VLE focus on fostering communication and interaction, motivation and, subsequently, acquisition of knowledge will also improve being as solid as the one provided by face-to-face courses.

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