BLENDED CLASSROOM IN ENGLISH WRITING CLASS:
A PILOT PROJECT

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Abstract: The digital shifts in academic world have been widely used to enhance language learning. This paper describes a pilot project on the adoption of a blended approach, i.e. the physical and virtual classroom approach, in learning writing skill for the second semester university students majoring in English language and literature. The purpose of using the blended learning approach is to increase the participation and understanding of the students in the learning process. In addition, it aims at encouraging students to be more active in discussions which can be quite difficult in large-sized classes. The physical classroom is used, in a traditional manner, e.g. physical interactions between teachers and students. Meanwhile, the virtual classroom is used, among others, to allow a class to have online discussion (with text) (Whitney, 2002), either with the whole class or with smaller groups. It is as well possible to share documents, such as essays or summaries with other students in the virtual classroom. The blended learning method is especially useful for language teacher as well as curriculum designers.

Keywords: *blended classroom, physical classroom, virtual classroom, writing skill*

Introduction

The use of information technology in learning and teaching English has increased in accordance with the development of the technology itself. The increased use of technology in learning and teaching is the result of the growing awareness of learners and teachers of the importance of technology in supporting the learning process. The broader range of internet connection brings a shift in the approach of learning from the traditional face to face into the virtual one. The availability of information technology and internet connection in educational institutions and the accessibility of electronic learning tools have pushed the possibility of implementing virtual learning as a support to traditional learning. The combination of traditional face to face and virtual learning is known as "blended learning" (Marsh, 2012). The blended learning approach is relatively a new learning concept. However, according to Marsh (2012: 30), recent research on blended learning indicates that this approach can significantly enhance the learning experience, if it is applied appropriately.

The blended learning approach is implemented in the class of writing expository texts. There are 27 students of the second semester participating in the class. They major in English language and literature of the Faculty of Letters, Udayana University. The class is taught once a week for three hours. The implementation of blended learning is a pilot project aiming at increasing participation and understanding of students in the learning process. Moreover, this approach is intended to encourage students to participate more actively in the discussion.

Related Concept

There are some terms involved in the use of learning technologies, such as distance learning, online learning, e-learning, and blended learning.

Distance learning is a mode of delivering education and instruction to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom (http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/Distance_education). In distance learning, teachers and learners are separated by physical distance.

Online learning is a kind of learning that relies on computers connected to the internet. In online learning, the responsibility lies on the learners while the teacher acts as the facilitator, mentor, provider, and the learning objective setter. (https://www.teachers.cambridgeesol.org/ts/digitalAssets/116069_Blended_ Learning_FAQs_Nov10.pdf).

E-learning involves things like online learning with more varied electronic media, such as the use of CD-ROMs, DVDs, TVs, etc. as the source of learning materials. E-learning can be done inside or outside the classroom. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-learning).

Blended learning refers to a mixing of different learning environments (Marsh, 2012:30), that is a combination of face to face and self-directed online approaches. These approaches allow learners to learn at a convenient time and space but remain constrained by the time limit agreed upon.

Related Studies

Researches on blended learning have been widely performed. Many researchers reported that the implementation of blended learning demonstrated significant benefits in the learning process. Boyle (2003) reported that blended learning can improve test scores and many also reported that learners showed positive attitude towards the implementation of such a mixed approach.

Kocoglu (2011) proved that blended learning is as effective as face to face learning approach. Kocoglu rejects researches that say that blended learning is superior as compared to face to face learning in terms of student learning. Krasnova (2013) found that implementing blended learning can save time and provide a learning environment that is flexible and convenient. Blended learning also has great potential in teaching foreign languages because it provides a great opportunity to integrate innovative and technological advances of online learning with interaction and participation of traditional learning.

Adopting new teaching approaches, such as blended learning, often finds little challenges. However, recent trends indicate that blended learning is an excellent way to prepare teachers and teaching institutions in implementing online learning (Kenny, 2011).

Blended learning in the teaching of writing has not been adequately done. However, Fennel and Bakir, (2003) found that practicing blended learning approach enables learners to communicate better and clearly written.

The Teaching of Writing

Experience has shown that learners often feel that they are weak in expressing their ideas in written mode. Some say that the writing assignment given by the teacher on an ongoing basis sometimes make them bored. This situation resulted in a declining interest on the part of the learners to participate actively in the learning process, especially in classes which are relatively big in number. It also resulted in the understanding of the topic being taught or discussed was less or unsatisfactory. To motivate the participation of the learners and to enhance the learners understanding of the topic being taught, in this case, writing expository texts, blending approach can be an alternative.

Implementation of Blended Learning in English Writing Class

Blended learning has not been part of the curriculum currently implemented in our institution. Consequently, this approach is applied to support the syllabus that is currently applicable. There are two tools that are used in teaching writing including Nicenet and Google Drive.

a. Nicenet

Nicenet, to be found at www.nicenet.org, is a free web-based virtual classroom. It is a place where the members of a group can share information, ask questions, and get extra helps from the members of the group. It is a computer mediated conferencing system similar to e-mail and a bulletin board rolled into one. It is a private classroom accessible only with a special code.

Nicenet offers some services that are analogous real face to face classroom activities. The features are especially good for written communication. They are conferencing, scheduling, document sharing, personal messaging, and link sharing.

Conferencing

This feature is a kind of "discussion board" which allows a class to have a discussion (with text) online. It allows teachers to create conferencing on topics for the class or to allow students to create their own topics. Class members write messages in response to the topics that can be read by everyone else in the class simultaneously. Members can then respond to or reply the whole group or to individual writers.

Scheduling

This feature is similar to the classroom bulletin board that allows teachers to post schedule and necessary information. It is especially good for posting assignments and schedule updates.

Document Sharing

With this feature, students and teachers have the ability to publish their documents—essays or stories, for example, on the site for everyone else in the class. Students can submit assignments in this place and classmates can give feedback or the instructor can then evaluate the work or make suggestions for improvement. No knowledge of HTML is needed.

Personal Messaging

Similar to traditional e-mail, this feature allows the instructor (or other members of the class) to communicate privately with individual students, the whole class, or any grouping of classmates. The teacher can comment privately on conferencing postings or give private feedback on published papers. This is a useful feature for student groups to use, for example, to collaborate on projects. It can also be used to give special help or attention to a student with a particular writing problem.

Link Sharing

With this feature, members of the class (students and/or teachers) can post links to interesting internet resources and categorize them according to topics. In a more practical way, this feature can be used as a "library" of links to web-pages that will be used in class activities or that may be useful to students outside of the class.

Google Drive

Google Drive is a cloud storage system that allows members of the class to store documents, photos, videos, and other files online. It is a free of charge service provided by Google. It is one of the most popular cloud storage services available today, offering fifteen gigabytes (15 GB) of free storage space. It offers the users a lot of features, such as uploading and syncing files, creating files, converting documents, sharing and collaborating, etc. However, only the feature of sharing and collaborating applied in the teaching of writing in our class will be explained below.

Sharing files

With this feature, members of the class (teachers and/or students) can make file sharing simple. They share a file from their Google Drive and they can let others view and even edit that same file. They can choose to either share a file with a limited group of people or a large one. Sharing a file with a limited group of people, collaborators must sign in with a Google account to view or edit the file. However, sharing with a larger group or make a file public, collaborators will not need a Google account to access the file.

Apart from the mentioned way, members of the class can provide a stable link to any file in their Google Drive. A stable link is like a private web address for any file a member wishes to share. This way is especially helpful for files that would be too large to send as an e-mail attachment, such as music or video files. Members of the class can also share a file by posting the stable link to a public webpage. By clicking the link a member will be redirected to the file.

Collaborating on Files

This feature allows multiple people to edit the same file, allowing for real-time collaboration. Whenever the members share a file in a Google Drive format, they will have the option to allow the co-editors or members of a group to change and edit that file. Google Drive offers several tools that enhance collaboration by making it easier to communicate with the co-editors or group members and to see which changes have been made and by whom.

Online Activities

Here are example of online activities practiced in our writing classes in Nicenet and Google Drive.
Some Examples of Online Activities with Nicenet:
i. Self Introduction

Students introduce themselves and exchange comments on the facts of their classmates in the "conferencing" room. Alternatively, students interview the classmates in the physical classroom and later introduce their classmate to the rest of the class with Nicenet in the "conferencing" room. The classmates, then, have to visit Nicenet and check for the accuracy of what has been written about him or her and offer suggestions for revisions to the author. The next week, the teacher gives feedback to the class either in physical class or in Nicenet class based on what has been written about members of the class. The example of the activities can be seen at http://www.nicenet.org/ICA/ class/conf_topic _show.cfm?topic_ id=913078.
ii. Assignment Posting and Conferencing

On weekly bases, students have to post writing assignments in the "conferencing" room. The rest of the class should read all the posted texts (paragraphs), analyse the error, and comment at least three of the posted texts. Then, the teacher gives feedback to the class online or face to face in the classroom.
iii. Instruction for Assignment Posting

The teacher posts an assignment for final expository essay. Before writing an essay, students have to do a virtual excursion to at least two popular sites in foreign countries. In group of three, students must visit and observe carefully specific websites that the groups agree to visit. Each group must visit different websites. Alternatively, the teacher can provide links to websites to visit and list them in the "Link Sharing" area.

After the excursion, each group must discuss the result of their excursion and write a maximum 20 minutes online group presentation in video format. The group presentation should be uploaded to Google Drive that has been shared by the class members. The rest of the class must go to Google Drive and participate in the presentation. Then, they have to ask questions to the presenters and discuss them in the "conferencing" room.

Upon the completion of the presentation and discussion, students must write an individual draft of essay based on what they have experienced during the excursion. The draft should be peer-reviewed for peer-correction, comment or feedback from the agreed readers. The author, then, should refine his or her essay before it is submitted to the teacher and posted at the Google Drive.

Some Examples of Online Activities with Google Drive:

Google Drive provides some useful applications for documents, spreadsheet, presentation, forms, and drawing programs. One application that we use in Google Drive is the words processor, known as Google Docs. It allows the users to create and edit documents online while collaborating with other users live. Below are some examples of the use of Google Docs for file sharing and collaborative work.

i. Group Sign up

Using Google Docs we can ask students to do group sign up online. The group members will act as a team when they are required to do an assignment in groups. For example, group discussion, virtual excursion, etc. The teacher has to provide a Doc form file that contains slots for students' number, students' name, and group names. The students have to sign up their student numbers and names in the prepared form online. The example of group sign up can be seen at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nOVgwV7-TVLb6HZZl pum0aagKZfomE9O2mhtgbRjdgk/edit

ii. Sign up for Website Addresses

Using Google Docs, it is as well possible for the teacher to assign different tasks to different groups. For example, before doing a virtual excursion each group should register at least two popular website addresses in the form that has been provided by the teacher to avoid identical tasks. Here is an example of a file where students sign up the web addresses to visit: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wFh3_DpB-GCQDtRPPCgmE25BsnUpx8gUfyYQKb B_ptJg/edit

iii. Peer-review Partner Sign up

With Google Doc form, students are asked to sign up one to two partners to work on reading or reviewing each others' drafts and giving advice on authors' projects. Students have to confer with each other to decide on who they will be working with. Please click on the link below to take you to a Google Doc where students can "sign up" partner(s).
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1un6doRf0oLqh4gglSyIa5V_dj9v8lM3_EFxEYXyGQi8/edit

iv. Peer-review and Collaborative Editing

Students must post their essay draft in Google Drive to be reviewed by their partners for correction, comment or feedback. Using the track changes and comment features, partner(s) can edit and give comment to the essay drafts. The partners can as well work together collaboratively to edit a text using Google chat room features.

The author must check the essay that has been reviewed by his or her partner(s) to agree or disagree to a specific correction or feedback before submitting it to the teacher as final version of the essay. The teacher will give feedback to the class in the real class and later organize the essay into an e-book to share with the students.

v. Online Presentation

One important use of Google Drive is to enable users to post videos. With this ability, students can post their online presentation to share with the rest of students in the class. Before posting online presentations, in groups, students are assigned to do virtual excursion, discuss what they have experienced during the excursion, write a report using power point, and present it in videos.

Learning Outcome

Through observation of the teacher and feedback from students, the following points can be described.

a) The implementation of blended learning approach in the class is very effective in which the online activities help the face to face activities run effectively during the learning process. The combination of face-to-face activity with online activity increase student enthusiasms. Although this new blended learning is administered for the first time in our class, a lot of positive things happened during the process of learning to write, especially in terms of participation, understanding, and active discussion.

b) Using technology and internet in teaching writing turned out to increase the student participation to support effective collaborations.

c) Using technology and internet in teaching also enhance students' understanding of the subject, writing expository texts. It is due to the wide opportunity for students to learn through written, spoken, and visual media appropriate to the needs of the students.

d) Technology and online activities seem motivate students to have active discussions on a given topic and online discussions help shy students to participate more actively.

e) Online peer-review and peer-correction to have trained the students to use higher level of thinking and to collaborate online in a real time.

f) Students can communicate more clearly and effectively using writing mechanism that has been learnt through written, spoken, and visual media.

Conclusion

Blended learning has turned out to be effective approach to improve the participation and understanding of students in the writing classes. It motivates active participation of students in discussions and rehearses the higher order of thinking.

It can be said that Nicenet and Google Drive are effective tools to improve the writing skill of the students. They are very useful to develop group-effectiveness skills that support the collaborative work. They are good places to store assignments and projects. All the writing work may become community property in which students can go back and mine it for ideas that they can use in their compositions.

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