

Using Moodle and Other Software Tools In EFL Courses In a Japanese IT University

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Abstract

Throughout their public school education, Japanese students are socialized into cultural learning practices [1] that emphasize group-oriented tasks. Well-organized group work is paramount to successful EFL teaching in Japan. In this paper, we look at how Moodle an open-source learning management system, is used at a Japanese computer science university to organize both individual and group tasks. Examples are provided of freeware and open-source software tools, such as CmapTools for concept mapping and Praat for acoustic analysis that can be used within Moodle to enhance EFL reading, writing, and pronunciation courses. We also explore how Moodle can be integrated with collaborative document production tools, such as Google Docs and Spreadsheets. Finally, we demonstrate the use of Moodle as a tool for action research, enabling the teacher/researcher to tightly control the course content in two different courses while systematically varying aspects of the content to test hypotheses about language learning. An important aspect of our work is the systematization of group process in language and communication courses and the development of a context for experimentation.

1. Introduction

University teachers often comment on the reluctance of Japanese students to speak in front of their peers, and the difficulties they have getting students to participate and communicate in the classroom. Our approach to teaching EFL is guided by an awareness of the cultural learning practices into which Japanese language learners are socialized throughout their public school education. Japanese public education has a long tradition of group work [2] and Japanese learning and teaching practices in public school education [3] ultimately influence how students learn in university [4]. The cultural learning practices of most of our students may contribute to shyness and

reticence in learners who resist their language teachers' efforts to promote communicative language learning environments [5]. Notwithstanding the Japanese government's 2003 Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities [6], which is intended to increase oral communication in public school English language education, the emphasis on preparing high school students for university entrance examinations still puts the focus on testable receptive skills. English in Japanese high schools is frequently taught employing the audio-lingual and yakudoku (grammar-translation) methods. Our interest is not to change student behaviors directly, but to build toward autonomous learning through culturally familiar learning practices. To increase student participation in our reading classes and prepare for autonomous learning, we have created a structured environment that accommodates our students' educational background. This structured environment is mediated by Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), an open-source Learning Management System (LMS). The use of Moodle has enabled us to not only structure individual and group tasks effectively, but it has also provided an infrastructure on which various freeware and open-source software packages can be included. In this paper, we will give an account of how Moodle has contributed effectively to EFL reading, writing, and pronunciation courses at our Japanese university and how it can be used to improve the methodology of some action research projects.

2. Group management with Moodle

In this section, we discuss our approach to promoting group work in our classes. We are attempting to encourage active participation by all students, to provide access to materials and assignments outside of class, and to support group cohesion.

Until recently, the research literature on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) tended to focus on the individual aspects of language learning. Even if communication within and among groups of students