

Chapter 4

Educator–Student Partnership: Utilizing Moodle to Investigate How Learner Autonomy Is Expressed

Judith Nesamalar Tharumaraj

Taylor’s University, Malaysia

Kalai Vaani Rajandram

Taylor’s University, Malaysia

Nallammai Singaram

Taylor’s University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The incorporation of web-based instruction within the educator-student partnership in the English language classroom today has taken on a pivotal role in complementing if not supplementing the traditional face-to-face teaching mode. In this study, the researchers set out to find out how pre-university students from various majors in Taylor’s University, perceive Moodle as an online English Language learning environment that is able to capture some of the facets of learner autonomy amidst face-to-face interaction with the educator. It evaluates whether these students recognize the effectiveness of Moodle as a tool that develops autonomous learning in the process of engaging with various online language activities prepared by the educator. An online survey was administered to capture their attitude and personal feedback on learning language through various Moodle features utilized throughout the semester. Findings of the research indicated that the students acknowledge Moodle as a language learning platform that enables autonomous learning to be practiced in a supportive environment.

INTRODUCTION

Partnership between educator and student in the process of teaching and learning is both vital and imperative in how knowledge is developed, gained, and passed down. The idea of this partnership is not new (Agnoletto & Queiroz, 2019). However, fostering this relationship to build an autonomous student,

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who seeks knowledge, is constantly being researched, more so since educator - student partnership is continuously evolving with time. For any educational partnership goals to succeed, factors such as time, communication, flexibility, expectations, teaching methodologies and practices, etc. would need to be considered. Being in a technological society, tools used to build a supportive virtual learning environment would also matter in the educator-student teaching and learning partnership. To be specific to this study, it would be a virtual learning platform, which is Moodle, that enables both the educator and the student to test boundaries where autonomous learning is concerned.

Achieving module learning outcomes have become the key aim in institutions of higher learning. This is alongside their drive to adapt, adopt and adjust to the use of various modes of information technology. This move is not only to constructively carry out their intended instructional materials but to also accomplish what the module embarked to pursue in the first place. Being so, classrooms are more structured in a fashion that all elements, from the educator, all the way to its learning space, is navigated and aligned. Hence, it is commonplace that the present classroom environment is built around the instructor utilizing Course Management Software (CMS), such as Blackboard and Moodle. Instructors are supported in their use of podcasts, online discussion groups and other technologies to engage, interact, communicate and connect with students. This blend between traditional face-to-face format and technology-based learning is said to work hand-in-hand with the learning experience. It is believed to foster an increased understanding and better student learning (Dillon & Gabbard, 1998). However, Ng and Jung (2018, citing Roche, 2014) and Sivanandan et al. (2014) assert that as instructors, determining the correct technologies to use and how to use these new technologies in the appropriate capacity is where the challenge lies for most educators today.

There is an understanding that blended learning through virtual learning environments are the norm today especially in this current COVID-19 pandemic situation. Virtual spaces have grown in such a fashion that it is able to meet the multifarious needs and wants of the millennials that handle technology with ease. The integration of web-based support in the English language classroom today has taken on a pertinent role in complementing if not, supplementing the orthodox face-to-face teaching mode. The trend in blended learning via online platforms directs teaching and learning towards one that allows students to regulate their progress indirectly and implicitly instead of the educator explicitly supervising the outcome and objectives of a lesson. The concept which blended learning intends to put forward via these computer-generated environments works on the systematic foundation that what students learn virtually will not only support, but also sustain what they learn face-to-face in class (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Thorne, 2003).

As a strategy that is no longer a fad, but instead a 'trend' that is here to stay, many EFL/ESL experts, policymakers, practitioners, and institutions today continue to question the effectiveness of learning the English language this way. In fact, Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) suggest that it is pivotal for educators to find the correct dynamics between online access to knowledge and information, and face-to-face teacher-student engagement. We have recently seen how educators were in a dilemma when the pandemic struck globally across nations (Egbert, 2020). This widespread disease somewhat forced educators and students to tip the balance. The predicament was such that we naturally gravitated towards a full online mode. Consequences were inevitable; the learning curve being one of them. While it is still not a mode of choice in courses that are directed at enhancing language skills and competencies, blended learning has certainly made an impression and spurred some interesting conversations.

While there is a need to follow trends sometimes, educators are challenged with aligning blended learning activities to student learning outcomes. This again, must match assessments and evaluation criteria.

On top of that, there is also the dire need to accommodate the students' way of learning a language and the general manner in which they learn new things. While this scenario is not new, it has nevertheless sparked re-imagining, re-defining, and re-creating of teaching and learning pedagogies. It has certainly become the catalyst that has brought about an alternative in education. Whilst educators are rethinking teaching techniques and frameworks, alongside learning environments, it has fundamentally re-shaped the kind of abilities, information, and capacity with virtual tools (Dofs & Hobbs, 2016). The impact can be said to be noteworthy on both the educator, as the moderator cum facilitator, with the student at the end of the spectrum. With this shift in paradigm, one must go back to the drawing board and ascertain whether the student is aware and understands what is expected of him. While the educator grapples with this new teaching possibility, greater is the responsibility of the student to grasp and comprehend what he is learning and how he is learning it.

The problem statement in this study is driven by the general slant in research where MOODLE is concerned. Much of the research has been devoted to showing educators the countless ways in which online platforms can be used to teach. The strategy is to tackle this with more and more diverse activities with the hope of not only reaching out to more students of various backgrounds but also to students who absorb and engage with information differently. By doing so, the feedback has been more teacher-centered than it has been, student-centered driving educators and teachers alike to focus more on their roles as facilitators and mediators of sorts (Lamb, 2014; Murray et al., 2014; Narum, 2013). Therein lies the gap in which this study explores.

The gap in which this study undertakes, assesses students' feedback in terms of targeted responses towards a specific ability. The targeted responses of the students are measured to form an impression of how autonomous learning takes place and in what capacity. In the light of this, the researchers set out to find out how pre-university students from various majors at Taylor's University, perceive Moodle as an online English Language learning environment that is able to capture some of the facets of learner autonomy amidst face-to-face interaction with the educator. The aim is to evaluate whether these students recognize the effectiveness of Moodle as a tool that develops autonomous learning in the process of engaging with various online language activities prepared by the educator. The main hypothesis of the study is that students acknowledge Moodle as a language learning platform that enables autonomous learning to be practiced in a supportive environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educator-Student Partnership

The partnership between educator and student in the educational world is crucial. Through this partnership, knowledge is evoked and favoured. Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2011) state that a positive relationship between educators and students not only lures students into the learning process but also stimulate their interest, motivation and participation in learning.

Jácome (2012) states that a teacher's role in setting up a suitable environment is important in building a student's learning autonomy in the areas of their learning methods, critical thinking, and metacognition. This is also echoed by Agnoletto and Queiroz (2019) but also adds on the development of cooperative and collaborative attitudes among students as well. It is also indicated that educator-student partnership is needed so educators can understand, engage, and meet their students' learning needs. In fact, Cook-

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Sather (2018) offers an interesting perspective. Sample stories from student-partners, who participated in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program maintained that the study of these students' narratives provided a dimension of learning that was not expected. Their involvement in this collaborative learning of sorts inspired a form of learning and knowledge acquisition. There was a renewed sense of their abilities, self-assurance, and a form of intervention that was welcomed. Students had different practical contact with, and varying observations of the stimulus provided via the collaboration, and they unanimously agreed that student partnership was fruitful and a worthwhile exercise to undertake for both students and educators alike. Partnerships were seen to forge a keen intuitive awareness and sensitivity towards what was being acquired. The need to take control of their learning and be held accountable for their educational journey was liberating for these students. This draws on students playing a proactive role in moulding the teaching within the classroom which this study also looks into.

Chaarouai (2019) interestingly states "The language teacher and learner (T-L) partnership is a give-and-take relationship that gains authenticity through mutual awareness that their collaboration can only happen through the learner's autonomy as an active partner and a source of information" (p.10). There is consensus when it comes to the autonomous learning and authenticity that this process offers. There is an indication that this process is able to transform our thinking about the nature of partnership with students (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). Previous studies have shown how students became active partners in pedagogical planning surrounding a teaching philosophy assignment which revealed students' understanding of the significance of authentic partnership. Understanding the education process as a partnership between students and educators has motivated a further endorsement that this newfound space for both students and educators engages in courageous change, growth, and learning (Bovill, Cook- Sather & Felten, 2011).

Hence, this aligns with Tharumaraj et al. (2018) when they highlight that recognising students' views and perspectives help in content development by educators, and this in turn leads to motivation to learn and appreciation of subject matter delivered. With a world that is constantly changing, the pedagogical approaches need to change to meet the needs of the learners. Through great partnership, love for lifelong learning and collaborative learning environments can be established.

Virtual Learning Environment

Virtual Learning is the umbrella term used to describe a number of course management systems (CMS) that incorporate internet and web technologies to complement education programmes. Currently there are various terms associated with virtual learning, such as Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Web Learning Environment (WLE), Managed Learning Environment (MLE) and Networked Learning Environment (NLE). These alternative terms, as pointed out by Navaporn (2010) have become almost cultural in today's society. They are either embedded in the education system or implicit in the course modules throughout institutions of higher learning. It is a necessity if not a common "go to" solution in this era of mobile savvy young adults. The out-of-class appeal that virtual learning has, has triggered further research into its potential to support the acquisition of language skills, learner autonomy and teaching and learning language as a whole. Furthermore, Marsh (2012) highlights the virtual learning environment offers and has the ability to further expand different learning approaches enabling those with different learning styles to gain extensive means to learn.

Previous research has studied the concept of virtual learning environment (VLE), its features and capacity to connect, engage and create interaction. These researches have addressed the issues regard-

ing the use of virtual learning environments within the higher education context. Researchers have studied its accessibility, frequency of usage, computer user competency and how far VLE supported the requirements of the module (Alves, Miranda & Morais, 2019). In the light of these results obtained and considering the VLE used in the sample institutions, results have always highlighted that the majority of students access the VLE frequently with no specific computer skills needed. Most findings were directed at students using these platforms for checking grades, obtaining academic feedback and receiving teachers' messages or notices. Similarly, these studies have also experimented and tested the lengths to which virtual learning is able to accommodate the needs and wants of both the educator and the student. The collaboration process, the dialogue exchanges and language target analysis are all areas that have been identified for study and has borne results worth delving in (Nikiforos et al., 2020)

However, with the development and evaluation of information technology, virtual reality technology has always been recognised and acknowledged for pushing the buck. Its scope is indefinite and has not been fully explored to date; hence, providing opportunities to offer an immersive and interactive experience for supplementing traditional classroom lecture and creating innovative online learning in education curricula and professional training (Huang & Backman, 2019). Further to that, researchers have argued that substantial evidence and more conclusive associations between forms of CMS applications and effective language learning needs to be investigated should a more grounded and sound deduction be derived (Benson, 2001; Chapelle, 2001). Arising from that, is the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) which is one such platform that has drawn a lot of attention since its advent and continues to be evaluated and re-evaluated as an approach to virtual learning.

Moodle

According to Ayan (2015), *Moodle.org* reported 64,232 registered sites for the year 2015. As of mid-2020, *Moodle.org* (2020) has statistically indicated 157,00 registered sites, 27,000,000 courses, 241 countries using it, and 216,000,000 users, making it a widely used open-source learning platform. This is supported by Rubin's (2020) article that highlights the number of registered sites on Moodle has grown to over 100,000 with more than 130,000,000 worldwide users. The article goes on to state that even corporations and organisations such as Coca-Cola, United Nations, World Vision International, etc. use Moodle (Rubin, 2020), not just educational institutions.

Moodle is the epitome of constructivism. It approaches teaching and learning in a purely constructivist nature. This means Moodle supports the theory that knowledge is built, generated and created like block-building. Hence, it can facilitate the various forms of inquiry-based learning. Collaborative learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning and so on subsist on interactions and construction of shared knowledge (Brandl, 2005). As an open source, this e-learning space designed by Martin Dougiamas, has evolved over the years, and has been fine-tuned to accommodate the needs and wants of various language learning environments such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The foundation on which Moodle sits lies its efforts to foster the attainment of new data and empirical material and the building of the students' own cognitive abilities during the process of communication with one other, and with the educator (Jonassen et al., 1999). Aligning with the theoretical foundations expounded by Piaget and Vygotsky has never been more relevant and timelier in an education system that is now thriving on virtual technology and boasting multiple online applications on various platforms.

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Bremer and Bryant (2005) in their study comparing Moodle versus Blackboard concluded that Moodle was preferred by both educators and students due to its easy to use interface and its availability of a variety of tools/resources. Costa et al. (2012) study brought focus that Moodle served more as a platform to upload materials for students; however, students in that study did acknowledge the importance of the tools available on the platform for the benefit of the teaching and learning process. The study also highlighted that Moodle was used in the researchers' educational institution because the platform enabled creating, organizing, delivering, communicating, collaborating and assessment activities, which was according to Piotrowski (2010) the 6 different activities an e-learning platform should represent (Costa et al., 2012, p.335).

Some of the major research using Moodle recently has continued to indicate that this platform is here to stay. With the Covid-19 pandemic at hand, this much needed platform has proved to be a robust and sustainable online learning environment for various needs. Studies have begun to use Moodle to model personality and traits using the learning analytics approach (Tlili et al., 2019). Similarly, Cabero-Almenara et al. (2019), have also gone beyond using Moodle for functional purposes when they used this platform for technical and didactic knowledge learning. In line with research that further tests the boundaries of Moodle, there are studies devoted to looking at how this platform enables the decolonizing of university curriculum (Mpungose, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that WhatsApp and other social media platforms are also gaining pace at present; their presence alongside Moodle cannot be underestimated. Mpungose (2019) in a recent study outlined that since students struggled to use Moodle owing to their disadvantaged school background; they were familiar with and good at using the WhatsApp social media platform. Similarly, Tapia-Repetto et al. (2019) point out that there is a high degree of acceptance of WhatsApp as a platform for learning. While this is hardly a competition of sorts, it does indicate that understanding the students' needs and wants is priority should the right tool be used for teaching and learning as Chang et al. (2003) sums up accurately, is based on three essential components: the device, the communication infrastructure and the learning model.

Language Learning

Marsh (2012) writes "there is no one way to learn a language, just as there is no one way to teach it" (p.1). With limited classroom time and students with various learning abilities, learning styles and learning motivation, teaching and learning a second language can be challenging. However, over time educators and learners have been advised to be flexible and versatile in employing various teaching and learning techniques and approaches in meeting learner's language learning outcomes.

Marsh (2012) states that educators need to create an authentic language learning environment with various tools and resources for language learning to take place. Ayan (2015) on the other hand draws attention for learning to occur, learners must be first eager to learn and through this motivation develops and follows to autonomy. However, Heng and Kaur (2015) interestingly state that for language learning to succeed, both educators and tertiary institutions need to realise that stakeholders such as learners, educators and managerial level need to make a joint effort by synchronising what is a feasible vision for language learning, working room for language teaching to happen and pragmatic responsibility students are willing to undertake in their language education. Without this, the language learning process will be challenging.

Warshauer (2003) argues for construct of global literacy with the support of online media. He suggests that “computer-mediated communication is one of the oldest yet still most valuable tools of network-based language teaching, as it puts learners in direct contact with others for authentic communication” (p. 28), and therefore, has favourable end results for teaching and learning of English. He attests to the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, wikis and weblogs as examples of online media to advocate global literacy. Adding to this, an earlier journal article by Warshauer (1996) expresses that e-learning reduces fear of language learners to use the target language and promotes motivation in interaction (Suppasetserree & Dennis, 2010).

Teachers are empowering students today to be responsible for what they learn and how they learn it. This free hand in determining how they learn is promoted through giving them access to a wide range of web-based tools that allow them to publish work and engage with live audiences in real contexts (Mhd Yunus, 2018). Language learning is no longer limited to the classroom. It is akin to bringing the ‘cloud’ into the classroom, or so to speak because learning English through mobile devices and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has gained popularity and credibility as a tool of learning language.

Hence, using digital platforms, such as Moodle, in the classrooms has become central to language practice. Digital technologies are normalized in language learning today as digital divisions are everywhere (Bax, 2011; Warschauer, 2003) However, digital tools have long been a feature of the world of education, particularly in language education (Bates, 2005; Salaberry, 2001). It is used to enhance areas of syllabus that are not taught in the classroom.

Recent research in the area of language learning and the use of Moodle has continued to create a positive impact if not a promising one. Its emergence has made English as second language acquisition a more flexible and elastic concept. Furthermore, the results suggest further development of positive experiences and minimizing demotivating factors in the online learning environment (Aikina & Bol-sunovskaya, 2020). This idea of elasticity is furthered when Moodle is used even in an EFL context. In Jordan, it was used to evaluate students’ English grammar performance and that they were strongly satisfied and motivated to learn English using similar methods (Al Bataineh et al., 2019). Hence, it can be concluded that blended learning can be used as an effective method of teaching English grammar in EFL settings.

With the growth of Moodle as an expandable platform, language learning today has slowly moved away from teacher-centred practices to a student- centered ones, hence changing the teacher’s role from that of a sole provider of knowledge to one that merely facilitates the student in his journey to learning certain skills.

Autonomous Learning

Great importance has been placed on autonomous learning. For more than three decades, it has been the attention of teaching and learning research and practices (Alzeebaree & Yavuz, 2016; Dang, 2012). Furman (2017) emphasises “autonomous learning is the future of education”. Learner autonomy can be seen to emphasize independent-learning and the moving away from teacher-centered practices. In 1981, Holec, opined as the foundational definer of learner autonomy, defines it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning, ... to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of the learning” (p.3, as cited by Heng & Kaur, 2015). Dang (2012) indicates that an autonomous learner takes charge of their own learning process by initiating, monitoring and evaluating. As building an autonomous learner is a collaborative venture between an educator and a student, it is important that

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resources and tools provided or directed for educational purposes by educators promote autonomous learning. Doğan and Mirici (2017) cites Willis (2011) indicate when educators and learners believe that learning is a shared responsibility between them, learning autonomy takes place.

While there are varying degrees of autonomy enabled by different online activities, there is a consensus that it is about allowing the learner to construct and dominate a large portion of knowledge in any context (Brandl, 2005; Brown, 2007; Ding, 2012; Papastergiou, 2006; Tam, 2000). In Ketteringham (2015), the researcher targets the practitioner's stance in ensuring Moodle fosters learner autonomy through discussions. The success of the practice is assessed by the number of visits a student makes on the site suggesting whether an engagement activity is effective in cultivating learner autonomy.

Jing (2016) in her study of 52 language learners derived mixed feelings where autonomous learning was concerned. While there was an indication that they strongly agreed that Moodle-based platforms promote the use of search engines to find answers to problems, a whopping 89% still felt that their teachers were more effective in providing knowledge. This does not account for the traditional spoon-feeding teaching style students are accustomed to in certain regions as Jing points out. This also suggests how teacher autonomy needs to be fine-tuned as a struggle to balance this student-teacher engagement is crucial in determining learner autonomy in a language learning environment is maximized.

Learner-autonomy continues to be the central agenda of why online platforms were introduced in the first place. Furman (2017) states availability and accessibility of new technologies have enabled independent / personalized /self-directed / student-centered learning to take place and succeed. It has been tested on prospective teachers to learn about how learner autonomy may be perceived by students using Moodle as seen in Musa et al. (2017) to its ability to enable to students to take-charge of their own monitoring of revision courses as seen in Iwata et al. (2017). It is a delicate power-struggle in a way between the student and the teacher.

In line with exploring independent, self-directed, and autonomous learning, Ramadhani and Siregar (2019) used a Self-Directed Learning model via moodle to enhance the quality and the effectiveness of student independent learning where language was concerned. The aim of the study was to identify if students could use technology devices in a correct and proper way to engage in Moodle sessions on their own. This Self-directed exercise through Moodle showed that learning resources used on Moodle were effective and efficient in improving student's learning on their own. The study also indicated that this exercise encouraged students to learn on-campus as well as at home, trained students to be ready for learning and allowed students to participate actively during face to face teaching and learning activities. Furthermore, it was also reported in this study that student learning outcomes were met in a more holistic manner. Taking from this, this study furthers the investigation into how autonomous learning can be expressed in other forms through other stimulants.

Hence, this study investigates the sub-criteria of autonomous learning in a way that enables the educator to observe how learner autonomy is expressed through direct and precise teacher instruction. It also looks at whether the student feels that he has the freedom to make choices and evaluate his own learning. Further to that, this study also attempts to understand if the student recognizes which areas specifically help them develop autonomy with the hope that there is a continuous desire for self-directed learning.

METHODOLOGY

In this research study, a descriptive research design and quantitative approach was utilized. Participants are pre-university students from 6 programmes (Business, Communication, Design, Engineering, Natural & Built-Environments and Science) enrolled to complete the English modules at Taylor's University, a private university, in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Taylor's pre-university students are required to complete both English 1 and English 2 as part of their program requirement. The students have four-hours of English classes for 14 weeks each semester and are exposed to the Moodle learning environment. The survey was conducted at the end of week-12 to week-14 of during English 2. A total of 231 registered students of English 2 module were approached to participate in this survey that was made available on the Moodle platform, on a voluntary basis. A total of 61% of the registered students completed the survey. Out of the responded 141 students, 89 are females and 52 are males; respondents are 62.29% from Business, 58.33% from Communication, 55.55% from Design, 62.5% from Engineering and 57.97% from Natural & Built-Environments and 70.27% from Science. All the registered students are known to have prior knowledge of the English language learnt from high school / secondary school / proficiency English courses.

Ary et al. (2006) indicated that survey is a tool that is widely utilized in education research and it enables attitudes and opinions of groups to be measured quickly and inexpensively. Thus, an online survey questionnaire was used as a means of collecting data for this current study. This survey questionnaire consisted of sections adapted from Gulbinskiene et al.'s (2017) research paper. There were five sections in the online questionnaire: demographic information, Feedback on usage of Moodle as an online English language learning environment, Moodle as an environment for enhancing student's motivation to develop language learning skills, Moodle as a confidence building environment in language learning, and Moodle as a tool in promoting learner autonomy. The items within these sections (excluding the demographic section) were rated based on a five-point Likert-scale format: *1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree*. The online questionnaire, which would take at least 10-15 minutes to complete, was made available on their Moodle English 2 module site.

Data obtained were analysed using statistical measurement through using SPSS 25.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Science). To ensure reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach Alpha test was carried out and it scored .967. A score of 0.7 and above is considered reliable according to Nunnally (1978). However, owing to sample size, Pearson Chi-Square value was not applicable due to small count per category. Total respondents obtained for each category (autonomy, motivation and confidence) based on the five-point Likert scale responses were calculated. Each total score was grouped into 3 groups: lowest score being 1-9, average score being 10 to 14 and highest score being 15 and above.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section reports responses received from students who completed the online survey questionnaire.

The overall feedback from students towards the use of Moodle (Table 1) was good. Majority of the students found it as a beneficial tool in developing English language skills through its resources and activities. With a response rate of 56% (Agree) and 16.3% (Strongly Agree), the platform has made learning English easier. Further to this, 53.2% (Agree) and 17.7% (Strongly Agree) students indicated

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the platform developed a more positive attitude towards learning the language. Majority of respondents, 54.6% (Agree) and 17% (Strongly Agree), indicated that the platform made learning English interesting.

Table 1. Students' overall response on the use of Moodle platform

ITEMS	Strongly Disagree % (count)	Disagree % (count)	Neither Agree or Disagree % (count)	Agree % (count)	Strongly Agree % (count)
Makes learning English easier	2.8 (4)	0.7 (9)	24.1 (34)	56 (79)	16.3 (23)
Have a more positive attitude toward learning English	2.8 (4)	0 (0)	26.2 (37)	53.2 (75)	17.7 (25)
Learn new words in English.	2.8 (4)	2.1 (3)	19.1 (27)	51.8 (73)	24.1 (34)
Develops time management skills	2.8 (4)	2.8 (4)	24.1 (34)	51.1 (72)	19.1 (27)
Ensures equal opportunity for all students to participate in	2.8 (4)	0.7 (1)	15.6 (22)	59.6 (84)	21.3 (30)
Increases social interaction among students during their learning process	3.5 (5)	5.0 (7)	22.0 (31)	51.1 (72)	18.4 (26)
Makes learning English more interesting	2.8 (4)	2.1 (3)	23.4 (33)	54.6 (77)	17.0 (24)

The majority of respondents of the current study have prior knowledge of English; thus, it can be more challenging to grab their attention and interest in learning the language. However, the findings show the idea of Moodle being a positive tool in complementing / supplementing traditional face-to-face mode of teaching by making learning English, interesting and easier even at the second level (English 2). Further, this research clearly indicates the cultivation of positive attitude and better time management which supports a good response to educator-student partnership in using Moodle as a source for language learning environment and learner autonomy. This is in accordance to Ayan's (2015) statement eagerness to learn leads to motivation which develops and follows to autonomy. Therefore, these findings reflect how language learning in a supportive online learning environment can be achieved.

Highlighting on this, Jing (2016) states Moodle's ability to support various classroom materials, audio-visual aids and interactive in-built activities for language learning environment leads to cultivating students' attention, interest and move to improve their language ability. Ayan (2015) goes on to state when students are satisfied with what an e-learning facility provides, they would be motivated to use it; thus, creating a positive attitude / perception towards its learning opportunity.

Clark (2013) indicated that utilising both online technology tools and overt teaching aids in expanding vocabulary knowledge and retention for language learners. With Moodle's e-learning environment, the current study shows 24.1% of students strongly agreed and 51.8% of students agreed that they were able to learn new words in English through it. Jia et al. (2011) in their research also concurred that respondents through the platform achieved growth in vocabulary acquisition. The ability for educators to upload resources, create word quizzes and direct learners to respective word acquisition sites through Moodle enables learners to develop language skills in and out of the classroom and at their own time and pace.

From the responses, the platform enabled equal opportunity for students to join in learning activities: 59.6% (Agree) and 21.3% (Strongly Agree). This is an encouraging response when it is a challenge for face-to-face teaching of any language in large number classrooms and limited classroom time. Fur-

thermore, 51.5% (Agree) and 18.4% (Strongly Agree) students stated their social interaction amongst each other increased during their learning process. In any language learning process, it is important for learners to use the language, learn from each other and make the best of the time they are in and through this study, we see this has been achieved. As learning a language and using the learnt language can be challenging and to some intimidating, Moodle has enabled the path for equal participation and social interaction. This further enhances the educator - student partnership in the language learning process. This coincides with Kavaliauskienė (2011) comment on Moodle enhancing communication between students and communication between teachers and students. In Jing's (2016) study, majority of the respondents stated Moodle enabled a supportive language learning environment through collaboration and communication with their peers.

It is also interesting to note students were also able to develop time management skills: 56% (Agree) and 16.3% (Strongly Agree). According to Jun and Lee (2012), there seems to be a regression in terms of student's learning outcome and time is taken to learn something new. With Moodle, students are able view resources / materials and participate in activities on the platform anywhere at any time. This provides flexibility and autonomy for students to follow their own learning pace, process and need.

It is also important to note several students stayed neutral in their responses to the statements in the survey except for learning new words and equal opportunity in participation through the platform.

The relationship between the students' motivation level and confidence level in using Moodle in developing learning skills and programs they were enrolled in were examined. The students from the English module irrespective of their pre-university program indicated a high level of motivation (65.2%) and confidence (68.1%).

Using cross-tabulations (Table 2), students from all the programs indicated Moodle as an autonomous tool for them to build their English language skills. A high score of 97.2% was derived. Communication, Natural & Built Environments and Science had a high score of 100% while Business and Engineering had a high score of 92.1% and 93.3% respectively. These high scores were contributed from the high responses from the following statements in the survey; 'Develop my ability to evaluate my own learning' (57.4% = Agree; 15.6% = Strongly Agree), 'Learn how to learn which develops my autonomy' (58.2% = Agree; 12.1% = Strongly Agree) and 'Promote my autonomy when I have some choice in the activities I do' (56.7% = Agree; 11.3% = Strongly Agree).

Dunlap (2005) and Mani and Mazumder (2013) state language learners can be accountable for their own learning through the development of self-reflection by using Moodle. This is also seen from the responses received in this study (Table 2). With the ability to self-reflect or evaluate one's own learning, it builds learner autonomy and a lifelong learner in language skills development. Besides this, Gulbinskienė et al. (2017) study cited Benson (2011) and Holec (2008) stating students' autonomy increases the quality of learning a language when learning alternatives and opportunities are given in and out of the classroom. This is further supported by Jun and Lee (2012) stating variation promotes students to continuously educate themselves. With alternatives provided on the e-learning platform, students would be motivated to develop their language skills, which is also reflected from the findings of this study.

There is a strong association between level of autonomy and motivation (Table 3). It shows that those with low motivation level also had low autonomy level which is 2.8%, in using Moodle in developing language learning. However, those with a high motivation level had a high autonomy level in using Moodle for building their English language skills, with a percentage of 65.2%.

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Table 2. Cross-tabulation between students' autonomy level in using Moodle in developing language learning skills and programs

Programs (Foundation)		Business	Communi- cation	Design	Enginee- ring	Natural & Built Environ- ments	Science	Total
Autonomy Level								
Lowest Score	Count	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
	% within Program	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%
Average Score	Count	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
	% within Program	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%
Highest Score	Count	35	7	15	14	40	26	137
	% within Program	92.1%	100.0%	100.0%	93.3%	100.0%	100.0%	97.2%
Total	Count	38	7	15	15	40	26	141
	% within Program	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3. Cross-tabulation between students' autonomy level and motivation level in using Moodle in developing language learning skills

Motivation Level		Autonomy Level			
		Lowest Score	Average Score	Highest Score	Total
Lowest Score	Count	2	1	1	4
	% within Program	100.0%	50.0%	0.7%	2.8%
Average Score	Count	0	1	44	45
	% within Program	0.0%	50.0%	32.1%	31.9%
Highest Score	Count	0	0	92	92
	% within Program	0.0%	0.0%	67.2%	65.2%
Total	Count	2	2	137	141
	% within Program	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Ayan (2015) cites Gao & Lamb (2011) indicating that there is a crucial interconnection between motivation, autonomy and identity of the learner. A learner would need to be interested and willing to learn in order for motivation and autonomy to follow. This is reflective in the findings.

Suppasetserree and Dennis (2010) note that language educators have been sourcing for effective, appropriate and productive teaching/learning tools that would motivate students to construct and improve language knowledge and skills. This is seen to be achieved with Moodle technology facilitation. This coincides with Gulbinskiene et al. (2017) and Ayan's (2015) study that indicate Moodle is a motivating tool and autonomy developer for students in enhancing English language skills. Both of these are needed to also ensure cultivation of a lifelong learner of the language.

Kelly and Kelly (2009) state one of the aims of designing interactive online activities such as wiki, discussion forums and chats is to motivate learners' participation and promote autonomy in their language

learning process. With computerised-based assessment, quizzes and time flexibility made available on the platform, learners can attempt them on their own whenever they want and reap the benefits from automatic grading. This in turn encourages both motivation and autonomy in learners to use this e-learning tool. Furthermore, Waheed et al. (2015, citing Ryan, 1982) state the feeling of autonomy evokes intrinsic motivation among learners. Adding on, the flexibility of time and space for learning opportunity through this platform appeals to learners, leading to intrinsic motivation to use it.

Data presented in Table 4 shows there is also a strong association between level of autonomy and confidence (Table 4). Those with low confidence level also have a low autonomy level, which is 5%, in using Moodle in language learning development. However, those with high confidence level had a high autonomy level in using Moodle for developing their English language skills, with a percentage of 68.1%. If learners experience positive outcomes by using the e-learning tool, it builds their confidence level towards it. This in turn increases the chance of it being used for independent and collaborative learning purposes.

Table 4. Cross-tabulation between students' autonomy level and confidence level in using Moodle in developing language learning skills

Confidence Level		Autonomy Level			
		Lowest Score	Average Score	Highest Score	Total
Lowest Score	Count	2	1	4	7
	% within Program	100.0%	50.0%	2.9%	5.0%
Average Score	Count	0	0	38	38
	% within Program	0.0%	0.0%	27.7%	27.0%
Highest Score	Count	0	1	95	96
	% within Program	0.0%	50.0%	69.3%	68.1%
Total	Count	2	2	137	141
	% within Program	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

One of the statements that scored high in the survey under the category of ‘Moodle as a Confidence Building Environment in Language Learning’ was the platform’s ability to enhance students confidence to increase knowledge and skills in English through collaborative learning activities & tasks (Agree = 52.5%; Strongly Agree = 20.6%). This is similar to the findings in Table 1, which indicated the e-learning platform was favoured for it created equal opportunity participation and increased social interaction among learners during the learning process. Moodle provides an avenue where introverts can participate and overcome their shyness in language learning. Blattner and Fiori (2009, as cited by Gulbinskiene et al., 2017) state as confidentiality and security are provided it encourages interactions; thus, autonomous learning is promoted, and language skills can be built and cultivated among language learners.

Furthermore, considering Table 3 and 4 together, as Wu et. al (2011, p.119, cited Butler & Lumpe, 2008; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006) stated “motivation, confidence, and ability are interrelated and interact with each other”. Thus, students’ confidence in Moodle as a supportive language environment is connected to their willingness in using it and positive experiences would enable autonomous learning.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Further studies on the current topic are recommended. The sample size for this study (n=141) is small thus generalisation is not possible but insights into the topic was achieved. It would also be interesting to see whether there are differences in outcome of data analysed based on gender. Knowledge on language learning skills and autonomous learning needs valued by different genders is important in order for the right balance between teacher instruction and web-based application, activities and resources are made available on Moodle for learning opportunities to take place.

A qualitative approach to understanding how learner autonomy is demonstrated can also be explored. While this study quantifies and associates the results with a numeral value, a qualitative technique of describing the data can illustrate the nuances and underlying ideologies as well as beliefs that perhaps influence the students' perception of how language learning through Moodle develops autonomous learning. A digital ethnography approach, such as Netnography, can be applied in this context. Netnography, which studies online communities and how they share practices and habits can be ascertained through the gathering of empirical material over a period of time (Kozinets, 2010). Gathering students' responses and studying them through a form of Narrative Analysis (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009) will be able to not only yield the patterns in their communication but also to a large extent provide insights into factors that shape their responses towards independent learning.

In addition, a comparative study can also be conducted between two or more applications within the Moodle platform in order to garner results that indicate particular features that produce optimal learner autonomy and independent learning. For example, a contrastive analysis can be employed to determine whether the Wikispace feature is more successful than the Forum feature in effectively promoting a students' want to learn and explore language on their own. This can be carried out either in a quantitative or a qualitative fashion. This will enable the educator to use the more accurate tool for a more fruitful outcome where student-centered techniques are concerned. By the same token, looking at other comparative platforms, such as what Mpungose (2019) has done with Moodle and WhatsApp, our perceptions alongside the students', can be elevated by looking at perhaps the Forum feature in Goodreads.com or Facebook versus the Forum application in Moodle. This again, can indicate to a certain extent how preferences, attitude and behavior may or may not have an impact on independent learning. The nature of these sorts of studies can broaden the scope of language learning and provide a multidisciplinary dimension to autonomous learning as connections and associations can be made to areas in psychology, sociology and anthropology.

CONCLUSION

The educator-learner partnership is always evolving and the success and balance of it is important in the educational world. This gives rise to the need for continuous research in this area. With large classrooms, limited teaching time and preference for embedded technology into teaching and learning, Moodle helps overcome these challenges. This web-based open-source learning platform has aided in the educator-student partnership in the teaching and learning process. It has become a popular tool in complementing traditional face-to-face format, including in the area of language education. The study shows the importance of a supportive virtual learning environment, which is Moodle, for both educators and students for developing language learning skills. As for the educators, indication on the use and frequency of attempt

as well as responses from the students on participation of various tasks set and instructions given will be a clear indication of the learners' affinity to use the learning resources. This further can be tied in with the performance of the students and the end of the module learning duration. Through the findings of the data collected and discussed, it shows that the pre-university students in Taylor's University finds the blended learning environment is supportive of their learner autonomy and development of English language skills. Furthermore, the students also indicated the areas in which this web-based instructional method has met and facilitated their language learning needs. Interaction among the teaching and learning community, vocabulary acquisition and self-evaluation / reflection were a few areas students have favoured within this blended learning environment. The results also indicated that students were able to reflect and evaluate the virtual learning environment they were in as well as the functionalities, tools and resources used by their educator within this medium for developing language learning skills. With this being said and as autonomous learning is a share-responsibility between educators and learners, this study provides insight to educators' pedagogic decision to continually cultivate students' autonomous learning in a class and language education using a supportive web-based learning platform. Last but not least, learner autonomy, motivation and confidence are attained based on the findings in this study and the hypothesis of the study is achieved.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Autonomous Learning: The learner takes ownership of their learning process and the educator plays more of a resource provider or facilitator role.

Blended Learning: Teaching and learning that involves combination of face-to-face and technology mediated instruction.

Educator-Learner Partnership: Where teachers and students share ownership and contribute to shaping the teaching and learning process.

Language Learning Environment: A physical and/or virtual surrounding or space where the ability for learning a language can take place.

Moodle: An open-source learning platform used for knowledge construction between educators & students and students & students using learning materials, tools and functionalities made available on the platform.

Supportive Environment: A learning area/setting that learners feel comfortable and safe which enables interaction, participation, and self-confidence.

Virtual Learning Environment: Course management systems (CMS) that incorporate internet and web technologies to complement education programmes.