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Moodle as Virtual Learning Environment in Developing Language Skills, Fostering Metacognitive Awareness and Promoting Learner Autonomy

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Abstract. The study evaluates the potentially relative effectiveness of Moodle as one of the virtual learning environments applied to develop English language skills, foster metacognitive awareness and promote learner autonomy in university settings. The respondents from Mykolas Romeris University and Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences were asked to express their attitude towards Moodle learning environment and assess their views on the improvement of language skills as well as fostering their metacognitive awareness and sense of autonomy in English language learning. The object of the research was students' evaluation of Moodle as an online English language learning environment. The research revealed that students find Moodle platform motivating in the improvement of their language learning skills. It was also established that using Moodle platform helps to develop metacognitive awareness and fosters learner autonomy.

Keywords: *autonomy, metacognitive awareness, Moodle, online learning, virtual learning environment.*

Introduction

This paper considers relative effectiveness of Moodle as one of the virtual learning environments on the development of English language skills, fostering metacognitive

awareness and promoting learner autonomy in university context. The relevance of the topic can be revealed by various aspects.

Benson (2011) and Holec (2008) claim that learner autonomy improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, that it is a human right, and allows learners to make the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. Based on Šernas (2006), Šliogerienė (2002, 2006) an autonomous student means a learner who has trust in himself/herself and desires to acquire strategies and knowledge to take responsibility for his learning. The term 'autonomy' is a rather wide concept. It means an individual's desire and ability to carry out, control, evaluate and project his activity upon mastering the tactics and strategy of autonomous learning, as well as the basics of its autodidactics (Šernas & Šliogerienė 2006). Although the theme is not entirely new in educational research, the relevance of virtual learning environment specially Moodle to language skills, metacognitive awareness and autonomous learning has not been properly assessed.

Furthermore, our students often complain that they seem to make no progress due to limited study skills, over-dependence on the teacher for their learning, lack of motivation and having fixed curriculum even if they take the assignments seriously. Learners are not used to raising questions in front of their classmates due to the timid and obedient nature of some of them, their individual differences and needs. However, the university curricula have not given room for the issue of training in using Moodle to develop language skills, foster metacognitive awareness and promote learner autonomy. The purpose of this paper is to find out if using Moodle can develop students' metacognitive awareness and promote their sense of autonomy in English language learning at the university. The object of our research is students' evaluation of Moodle as an online English language learning environment. Having chosen this object, the aim of the research is to analyse students' evaluation of Moodle as the promotion tool to develop metacognitive awareness, autonomy and language learning skills. The methods of the research include the analysis of methodological references, a quantitative research and statistical data analysis. The paper explores the problem of the students' evaluation of Moodle platform to develop metacognitive awareness, learner autonomy and language learning skills. Therefore, the main hypotheses of this study are: 1) students find Moodle platform motivating to develop language learning skills; 2) using Moodle platform helps to develop metacognitive awareness and fosters learner autonomy.

Review of literature

To start with the descriptions of some concepts, Holec's (2008) early and still influential definition of learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's learning and hold the responsibility for the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning including determining the objectives, defining the contents and progress, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition and evaluating what has

been acquired. Benson (2011) replaces 'ability' with 'capacity' and 'take responsibility for' or 'take control of' with 'take charge of' in this definition. He also includes the notion of 'willingness' to stress the point that irrespective of their capacity, learners' autonomy will not be promoted unless they are willing to take responsibility for their own learning.

Based on the literature review a conclusion can be drawn that it is in fostering metacognitive awareness where competent learners differ from less competent or less successful ones. It has been suggested that competent students are more metacognitively aware and apply a higher number of metacognitive strategies than the less competent ones. (Chamot, 2008; Oxford, 2011). Indeed, metacognitive awareness has been found to enable learners to gain major self-control or self-regulation of the composing process (Oxford, 2011). Metacognitive awareness has been singled out as "the construction manager whose job is to focus, plan, obtain resources, organize, coordinate, monitor, and evaluate the construction of knowledge" (Oxford, 2011, p. 44).

Many researchers have attempted to discover different learning techniques that students need to be equipped with in order to gain metacognitive awareness, make metacognitive judgments and choices (Zhang, 2007). Based on Berthold et al. (2007) and Nückles et al. (2009) appropriate prompts in the classroom foster metacognitive awareness in students. Berthold et al. (2007) showed that using prompts in the form of questions had a very large effect on fostering metacognitive awareness and promoting autonomy. Therefore, if students are convinced of the usefulness of metacognitive awareness and sense of autonomy, the impact of prompting is likely to be bigger. Students have to acquire the basics of autonomous studies which are relevant to their needs and develop learning strategy and tactics of any language, along with their own autodidactics in picking up metacognitive skills in the learning process. Individually applied methods, without an integrated strategy and tactics, allow an application of partly acquired learning techniques, so it is necessary to aggregate all these strategies and tactics, and synthesise all the gained knowledge into the language activity learning paradigm. In order to become autonomous, learners have to master metacognitive skills covering self-direction, self-control and self-evaluation, which are further subdivided into such skills as monitoring, testing, diagnosing, repairing, evaluation, and reflection (Šliogerienė & Suchanova, 2004, 2009).

Findings and discussions

Students studying English for Specific Purposes at Mykolas Romeris University and Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences were given a questionnaire to provide feedback and evaluate language learning on Moodle platform. As it can be seen in figure 1, the general opinion of the students is that they agree Moodle can be an online learning environment fostering students' metacognitive awareness and consequently promoting a sense of autonomy in them by learning how to learn, making choices in decisions, evaluating their own learning. Moreover, Moodle can facilitate English language learn-

ing in terms of students' improvement of language skills and communication, students' motivation, confidence and attitudes towards English language learning.
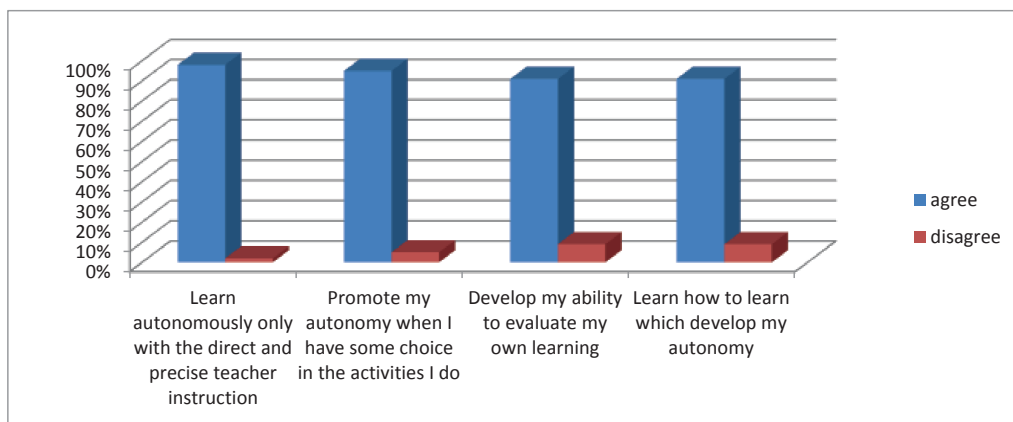

Fig. 1. Students' evaluation of Moodle as an online English language learning environment

Almost all the questioned students (98%) believe that they learn autonomously only under the direct and precise teacher instruction. This finding reflects learners' belief in the role of teachers' co-operation, instruction and interaction which plays an important role in promoting learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is most strongly associated with 'learning to learn' as the learners' views are well- aligned with the findings of references provided in the article. Actually, 91% of the students agree that Moodle could be used to promote their sense of autonomy by learning how to learn. The statement 'Learning how to learn is a key to developing learner autonomy' did, in fact, receive the joint highest level of agreement from students, 95% which is associated with giving learners a choice in decision making about their own learning. As a matter of fact, they agree that autonomy implies they can make choices about how they learn consciously. It can be claimed that this finding corresponds with the views of Benson (2011) and Holec (2008) that learners' autonomy improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, that it is a human right, and that it allows learners to make the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. Learners' beliefs seemed to have a more immediate grounding in the positive impact that choice would have on learner motivation and subsequently on their learning. Most of the students, 91%, have positive attitude towards Moodle application as a way to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning. This is consistent with the general trend observed in the works of Šernas and Šliogerienė (2006) who define an autonomous student as a learner who has trusts himself and desires to acquire strategies and knowledge to take some responsibility for his learning.

The students' positive views and opinions regarding Moodle as an environment to facilitate English language learning can be explained by the fact that online platforms, such as Moodle, provide authentic interaction and communication that the students might not have experienced before. Such positive experience could then lead to "increased confidence in language acquisition and a sense of connectedness" among the students (Wang & Chen, 2007, p. 6). It allows and facilitates the necessary interactions with teacher that improve learning. As such, the students in this study were able to experience the improvement of their language and thus attest to the aptness of Moodle as an online environment that could facilitate English language learning.

In terms of enhancing confidence (figure 2), most of the students are of the opinion that Moodle could increase their confidence to write, read and communicate in English, 84%, 81% and 81% respectively.
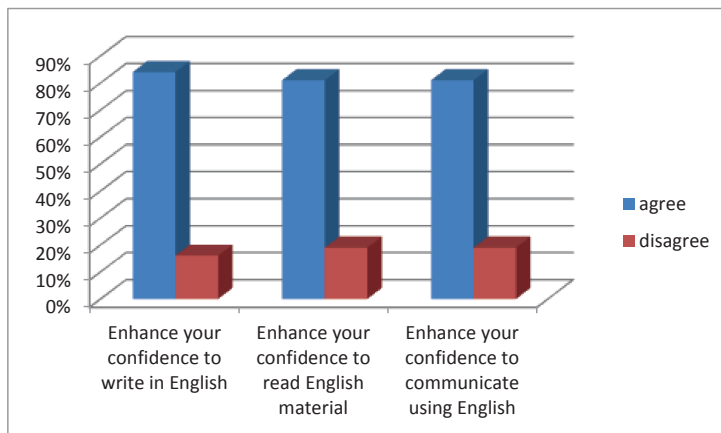

Fig. 2. Students' confidence evaluation

Confidence building can be caused by using Moodle platform with the teacher as a promoter, applying English for practical purposes which are governed by linguistic rules, focusing on the experience of both meaning and mechanics of language learning. This finding is consistent with Lankard (1995), who stressed that in this type of learning, "the primary intent of the activity is to accomplish the task, not to learn" (p. 5). Such online computer-mediated communication (CMC) benefits shy and introverted students, whereby they interact more with their teacher and rely less on their mother tongue.

Over 78% of the students agree that Moodle could be an environment for enhancing students' motivation to read, write and communicate in English (figure 3). The most convincing explanation for such a finding may come from the observation of Haverback (2009, p. 1) of her own students that took charge of and directed their own learning, and quite similarly, students in the current study demonstrated similar self-directed learning. Moreover, the fact that the learners who study using Moodle get more motivation is

consistent with the general trend observed in the notion of Gass and Selinker (2008) of affective learning and students' motivation as a "strong predictor of success in language classes" (p. 21).
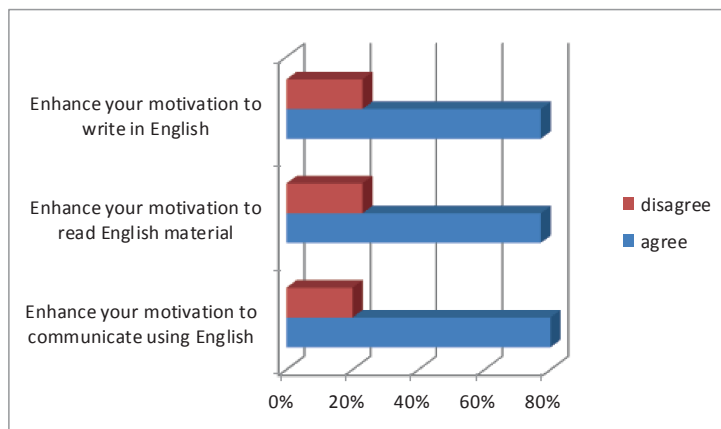

Fig. 3. Students' motivation in developing language learning skills

73% of the students concur that their participation in Moodle has inculcated a more positive attitude towards learning English as a second language. This evaluation can be provided most probably because of the usage of various activities, quizzes, online games that make the students have a conscious effort to understand and learn the language as well as learn new vocabulary through discovering them and checking their meaning in dictionaries or getting it via context or teacher's comment (figure 4).
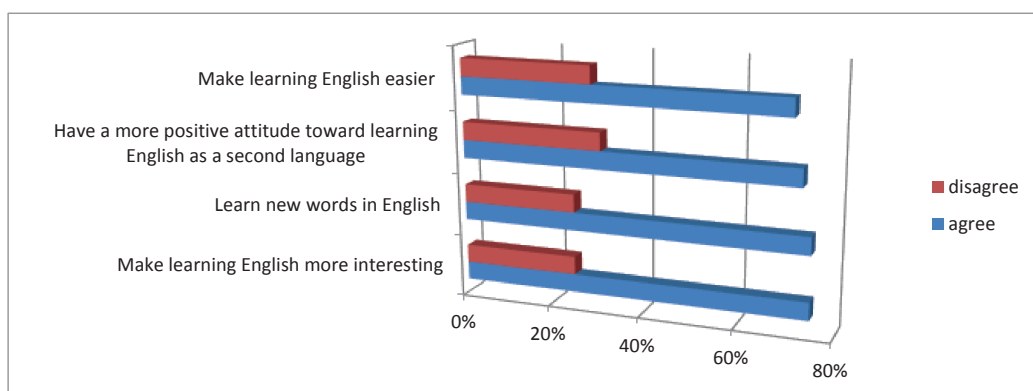

Fig. 4. Students' feedback on usage of Moodle platform

Based on the questionnaire results, a conclusion can be drawn that Moodle platform activities help to learn a language easier and the learning process becomes more interesting

to the students, almost 80 percent of the respondents acknowledge the fact. This finding is in line with many of the previous findings on vocabulary learning in an ICT-based learning environment (Shahrokni, 2009).

Therefore, it can be claimed that the findings of this study lend support to speculations made by Blattner and Fiori (2009) that Moodle can function as an online environment which facilitates English language learning, improves students' language skills and enhances students' motivation, confidence and attitudes towards English language learning.

Blattner, and Fiori (2009) regard the need for an audience as a "sense of belonging", which Moodle can easily and effectively enhance, and simultaneously "offer constructive educational experiences while maintaining privacy and safety" (p. 25). Kitsis (2008) also suggests that perhaps too much weight has been placed on serious academic writing in classroom contexts, and less attention has been given to this type of informal probing and testing of ideas (like in Moodle), "where much of the best thinking occurs" (p. 31). As such, the students feel at ease studying in the Moodle environment. The above findings expound and substantiate Blattner, and Fiori (2009) claim that Moodle is a "powerful learning tool that is not only built of synchronous and asynchronous technologies that has transformed learning but has also extended the reach of those communicative tools" (p. 19).

Conclusions

Virtual learning environment encourages students to discover learning that is facilitated by their participation in Moodle. In terms of the use of Moodle to facilitate language learning, it is important to ensure that awareness of opportunities and the value of such learning should be underlined and be brought to the students' attention which can increase their competencies and self-knowledge, value lifelong learning and improve their life skills. To achieve these results, teachers need to inform students of the objectives, the intended learning outcomes, how to identify the learning results and what strategies and techniques to use when learning occurs.

Due to the technologies that support Moodle and features that characterize this learning platform, using Moodle can engage students in meaningful language-based activities, of course, if they are planned appropriately as part of an educational project. Based on the data collected by the students in this study, Moodle as a supplementary virtual learning environment could be used as a great opportunity for students to facilitate their learning of English but cannot totally replace the value of contact hours and real lecturing of the teachers.

Most students come to the university without having sufficient background in autonomous learning and wait to be spoon-fed by the teacher. The usage of Moodle environment in the learning process requires a few steps that teachers should go through. First,

they have to start with the explanation of very basic ideas of this notion. Then, teachers should describe the process of autonomous studies which may occur within a structured environment called 'structured autonomy'. The next step, teachers have to monitor if students are able to demonstrate some autonomy because they're already aware of the techniques and strategies. Finally, students are encouraged to project their future needs and plan their activities.

A conclusion can be drawn that using Moodle has a huge effect on learners' motivation. The more motivated the learners are, the more autonomous they become what affects their ability to develop language skills. The relation between autonomy and motivation is well-established at a theoretical level, although the precise nature of this link is a focus of continuing empirical activity. Moreover, if the learners know what they're doing on a day-to-day basis or task-by-task basis and understand why they're doing something, why it's important to them, they become more metacognitively aware of their own learning.

We can conclude that a learner should be given a lot of freedom to develop his own style, to choose the materials they want to use, to define objectives they want to achieve while taking responsibility for their own learning. To function autonomously as learners, students make their own decisions about their learning, their own choices, not depending exclusively on the teacher for their learning and their learning outcomes. Having taken all the factors into account, Moodle is an inspiring virtual environment for a teacher to help students to take their own learning in charge as much as possible, to be more autonomous, develop their own strategies and give them an opportunity to work at their own pace.

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Virtualios mokymosi aplinkos *Moodle* vaidmuo formuojant kalbinius įgūdžius, skatinant metakognityvinį sumanumą ir besimokančiojo autonomiškumą

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Santrauka

Šis tyrimas įvertina santykinį *Moodle* kaip vienos iš virtualių mokymosi aplinkų veiksmingumą formuojant anglų filologijos studentų anglų kalbos įgūdžius universitete, skatinant universiteto anglų filologijos studentų sąmoningumą ir metakognityvinį sąmoningumą. Siekiant šio tikslo, anglų filologijos studentams buvo pateiktas klausimynas, tiriantis jų nuomonę apie *Moodle* mokymosi aplinkos naudą, gerinant kalbinius įgūdžius, besimokančiųjų motyvaciją, pasitikėjimą savimi, autonomiškumą mokantis anglų kalbos. Tyrimas atskleidė, kad taikant *Moodle* besimokantieji gerina savo kalbinius gebėjimus, skatina savo metakognityvinį sumanumą ir ugdo autonomiškumo jausmą. Galima daryti išvadą, kad besimokantiesiems turėtų būti suteikta daugiau laisvės kuriant savo mokymosi stilių, pasirenkant medžiagą, kurią jie nori naudoti, apibrėžiant tikslus, kurių jie nori pasiekti bei prisiimant atsakomybę už savo mokymąsi. Tyrimas patvirtino, jog *Moodle* yra įkvepianti virtuali aplinka, padedanti studentams imtis atsakomybės už savo mokymosi rezultatus, mokanti atsakingumo, savarankiškumo, galimybių kurti savo strategijas bei dirbti savo tempu.

Esminiai žodžiai: *autonomija, metakognityvinis sąmoningumas, Moodle, mokymasis internetu, virtuali mokymosi aplinka.*