

Engaging in English language Learning-Acquisition Using Edmodo and Telegram Among Open Distance Learners (ODLs)

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Abstract

Distance education differs from normal face-to-face classroom situation in terms of a learner or teacher's physical presence. It is crucial for the distance teachers to provide optimal learning support to ODLs (open distance learners) and prepare them for educational changes. The use of Web-Mobile Platforms (WMPs); Edmodo and Telegram in English language learning-acquisition among the undergraduate ODLs enabled learners and educators to stay connected regardless of physical space and time constraint. This study aims to generate insights and sharing through online questionnaire on Edmodo and Telegram to seek and identify learners' perceptions in terms of language learning-acquisition process in both contexts. The WMPs were used to accommodate learners' language learning materials and online discussion forums thus functioned as the scaffolding to facilitate learners' language learning-acquisition process. The study employs purposively sampling involving eleven undergraduate ODLs from a Malaysian university. The findings are presented in a narrative manner to illustrate the emerging themes and the pedagogical implications pertaining to how the WMPs provided learners access to English learning resources beyond the classroom learning time and opportunities to interact with their peers suggesting practicality and convenient ways of engaging in language learning-acquisition via the WMPs while complementing the existing face-to-face learning mode.

Keywords: WMPs, Edmodo & Telegram, Scaffolding, ODLs, language learning-acquisition

1. Introduction

The concept of teaching and learning in Malaysia has always been associated to the physical presence of school buildings, traditional classrooms scenario, examination halls, textbooks, teachers and students. Classroom teaching and learning, in addition has often been associated as teacher-centred approaches and chalk and talk drilling method. On the other hand, with the advent of information and communication technology (ICT), the scenario has changed with the introduction of virtual classrooms offering flexibility in an online classroom community thus promoting technology-driven teaching and learning environment towards students either in schools, colleges or universities as well. The virtual environment of teaching and learning characterised by technological advancement has increased the opportunities for interactions between teachers and learners, and among learners regardless of time and space (Hamzah, 2006, Krish & Wong, 2009, Hussin, 2006, 2008) using synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery.

In addition, Embi (2015) pointed out that the traditional concept of teaching in Malaysian institutions needed to be re-examined while new approach needed to be further explored to suit the growing challenges in preparing learners to meet the requirements of the 21st century education scenario. Hence education that is current, relevant and able to translate academics into practical output has always been the priority of Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and therefore, higher learning institutions in Malaysia were urged to conduct classes or online lectures in keeping abreast with the current information technology (Bernama, 2016). Alias (2016) applauded the move made by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education for promoting lifelong learners as part of the strategy to support flexible education.

The process of teaching and learning has become more interesting with the availability of technology in ICT but on the other hand more challenging. The advancement of Internet technology may help teaching and learning

become more productive in terms of improvement and enhancement. Hence, technology may become one of the most important drivers in both social and linguistic changes in the education system today. Integrating technology into language classes such as social networks would be able to help learners to be involved actively in the language learning process continuously at anytime and anywhere possible.

Meanwhile, technology skilled educators will continue to be integral part of learners' lives while technology bridges the physical space and time constraints between teachers and learners and distance learning has already been part of many higher learning institutions programmes now. Durak and Ataizi (2020) reported that based on a study conducted, almost all learners felt that distance learning platforms offered great convenience in terms of time and location.

Distance education is clearly different from normal face-to-face classroom situation in terms of a learner or teacher's physical presence. Distance learning refers to any form of remote education where learners are not physically present for the lesson and this phenomenon is growing fast now with the Internet accessibility as an alternative in teaching and learning process (What is Distance learning?, 2020). The implementation of online or distance learning helps to address the needs of learners who are not able to be physically present at their institutions due to the various reasons given (Clark, 2020). "Unlike the face to face discussion in the classroom that is limited to learning space and time constraint, e-forums allow teachers and learners to interact with one another outside the four walls and specified time", (Hussin, 2006). Learners can utilise the language learning materials available uploaded by the educators and make use of them in order to be engaged in language learning-acquisition processes despite not being physically there in the classroom. Consequently, it is important for the distance teachers to be able to provide optimal learning support to ODLs and prepare them for educational changes as their first priority (Dzakiria & Christopher 2010).

The use of WMPs (web-mobile platforms), Telegram application for example supports teaching and learning enhancement by providing a quick way and easy platform for sharing information among teachers and learners (Ibrahim et al., 2016). By using Telegram, people are able to create groups for up to 5000 people for broadcasting to infinite audiences (Vivienne, 2016). Furthermore, in a study focusing on transparent and ubiquitous learning (Mokhtar, Hussin & Embi, 2015), selected Edmodo platform for interactive lectures due to its interesting simple features which includes simple ways in file sharing and online communicating, encourages a peer-learning and a peer-support environment both in classroom and online as well with various websites layout templates and in a secured environment. Therefore, the situation given above prompted this study to look into the potential of WMPs, Edmodo and Telegram to benefit learners and educators by providing solutions to the challenges learners faced while engaging in English language learning-acquisition via the WMPs thus resolved the problems that contributed to the learners' language learning process. Technological tools available such as Edmodo and Telegram, can be integrated as tools or learning platforms in acquiring language among the learners. The WMPs were selected to fulfil learners' needs to complement the existing face-to-face mode of learning in terms of access of additional supportive English learning materials, learning activities, doing assignments and opportunities to interact with their fellow classmates.

Although learners have limited abilities to solve problems by themselves, they could exceed their limitations and reach higher levels of performance with teachers' or peers' assistance. The gap between what they could achieve on their own and with assistance is termed as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), (Hussin, 2008) considered that it constituted a generative potential for learning. He further elaborated that when appropriate support or some sort of assistance (scaffolding) were provided to the learners to perform a certain task through social interactions, this move would motivate learners to accomplish the given task because learners were within the ZPD that consisted of Actual Development Zone and Potential Development Zone, (Vygotsky, 1978). Edmodo and Telegram would act as the scaffolding of the Zone of Proximal Development that facilitated learners' language learning-acquisition process.

To conclude, learners were given opportunities to gain experience, be accountable to their own learning but also responsible to contribute to the success of the specific course objectives designed for them (Hussin, 2006) which would change the traditional role of a teacher, emphasizing the importance of student-centered learning which involved tasks and activities administered by the learners themselves with the support from the teachers through Edmodo (web-based environment) and Telegram (mobile-based environment). The emergence of social media tools such as Edmodo and Telegram have significant impact on learners' lives and integrating the tools into teaching and learning in classrooms are becoming important part of teaching and learning norms in the current education community. Educators at universities around the world have been exploring on how learning tools would benefit their students. Commonly, English practioners used these tools to primarily support their teaching

and learning activities. The use of the learning tools can increase interactions between all those parties involved in the teaching and learning process (Arnold & Gorus, 2010).

Studies in the past focused only on a normal traditional face-to-face setting on a full-time student basis at tertiary level either locally or abroad but on the other hand not on ODLs context in Malaysian higher learning institutions. The implication of the study would be able to benefit learners and teachers in Malaysian ESL context on how Edmodo and Telegram platforms can be a reliable educational tool to the ODLs to help them manage their learning time while engaging in language learning situation via online. It is hoped that the findings gathered in this study would be able to acknowledge the use of Edmodo and Telegram platforms among the ODLs in Malaysian higher learning institutions while further studies need to be conducted in order to understand the nature of language learning acquisition among the ODL students.

2. Method

The goal of this study is to examine ODLs' perceptions on English language learning-acquisition using the WMPs; Edmodo and Telegram.

2.1 Research Question

How does language learning-acquisition take place in both platforms - Edmodo and Telegram environments?

The data collection was conducted throughout the semester due to the circumstance that the researcher and the students only met once a month for a duration of four hours in every meeting, in a face-to-face classroom setting, (four meetings in a semester, for a period of four months). The learners were introduced to web-mobile platforms; Edmodo and Telegram with minimal training during the first hour of the first meeting. Learners were exposed on how to log in and utilise the contents in the platforms including the English language materials and the online discussion forum. They were also guided on how to post questions, messages and reply posts in the thread. The learners were encouraged to participate in the WMPs at anytime and anywhere convenience to them. The researcher moderated and observed learners' activities and participation in both platforms. The WMPs were selected to fulfil learners' needs to complement the existing face-to-face mode of learning in terms of access to relevant learning materials, learning activities, doing assignments and opportunities to interact with their fellow classmates.

The learners were asked to answer the online questionnaire on Edmodo and Telegram at the end of the fourth meeting. The learners responded to the online discussions and materials uploaded in Edmodo and Telegram during their study throughout the semester. The data obtained from the online questionnaire were then analysed by the researcher at the end of the semester.

This study employed purposively sampling involving eleven undergraduate Malaysian ESL (English Second Language) ODLs from a local university offering distance education programmes. Merriam (2009) stated that, "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher intends to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learnt". The number of the students selected were based on the students' subject registration list in the English course at the university. The researcher taught English subject course at the university.

In terms of technological skills, all learners were computer-literate, having sufficient knowledge and skills to be able to use the computers and familiar with the operation of computers along with necessary abilities to access the Internet using smart phones or other devices as well. All ODLs have basic computing and Internet skills required in their work place.

The instrumentation used in this study was online questionnaire on the use of WMPs; Edmodo and Telegram to elicit responses from the students. All the data collected were dominantly qualitative in nature. The online questionnaire was designed to further investigate the use of Edmodo as a social teaching-learning platform and Telegram as a mobile-based environment in language learning. The questionnaire consisted of a series of questions with regards to the learners' language acquisition on the usage of Telegram and Edmodo platforms, learners' familiarity to the WMPs, activities used, things learned, WMPs preferences and the materials uploaded. The questionnaire also looked into learners' suggestions on the web-mobile features and learners' willingness to participate in the virtual learning platforms.

The online questionnaire was distributed to 11 learners at the end of the semester (Meeting 4) to acquire the learners' feedback and opinions on using the platforms as a language-learning platform and received information about their opinions, feelings and points regarding their participation in the WMPs. The researcher provided learners with required and sufficient information regarding the questions on the usage of Edmodo and Telegram

as the WMPs. The researcher also advised the learners to seek for information and explanation in the event that the questions were unclear to them. They were given ample time to respond to the online questionnaire.

3. Results

3.1 Online Questionnaire

The researcher used the data obtained from the instrument to answer the Research Question. The presentation of the data analysis was based on the online google form questionnaire on Telegram apps and Edmodo platform. It is significant to point out that questions (Q1-Q14) in the online questionnaire were divided into five main themes as follows; activities benefitted learners most in Edmodo/Telegram platform, learners' familiarity with both web-mobile platforms, learners' sharing of information and thoughts, learners' willingness to participate in the web-mobile platforms and learners' opinion/comment/feelings on the content of the learning materials.

3.2 Activities Benefitted Learners Most in Edmodo/Telegram

Questions 1 to 4 were the category on activities that benefitted the learners most. The learners were asked to explain activities they liked most and how the activities benefitted them in enhancing their language competency. Based on their responses, out of 11 learners, 6 learners stated that the grammar activities and speaking practices were the activities they enjoyed most. The learners further added that those activities built their self-confidence, allowed them to lean on each other for support and gave them opportunities to ask questions to their course mates. 6 of the learners mentioned that the language activities helped them to improve their speaking skills and provided them space to interact with their fellow colleagues and the Edmodo/Telegram apps was an ideal place to share helpful tips and articles they came across. Meanwhile for the grammar activities according to 1 of the learners, the activities helped him to be able to write using correct grammar rules. Another learner said that he could learn from each other and shared some information. In the next question, activities that learners would like to see and do in Telegram were chatting because the apps comes with exciting pictures and emoji or perhaps face time features where they could meet their course mates face-to-face online whenever possible.

R1: *“Interaction- ideal place to share helpful tips and articles you come across so that others can benefit from them”.*

R2: *“ Language lesson-Joining an English-language learning group will allow you to lean on each other for support and ask questions to others who are in the process of learning English”.*

To summarise, it can be concluded that speaking practices and grammar activities benefitted the learners the most because the activities helped the learners to improve their speaking skills and provided them space for interactions among each other in order to enhance their language learning-acquisition. The learners also stated that the WMPs were ideal for them to share information with their course mates due to the exciting features available.

3.3 Learners' Familiarity

The second category (Q5) was based on learners' familiarity to both web-mobile platforms; Edmodo and Telegram and the results showed that out of 11 learners, 10 stated that they liked using both platforms for the purpose of learning engagement as alternative platforms beside face-to-face normal classroom meeting. The results indicated that learners gave positive impact towards the use of Edmodo and Telegram apps thus supported the learning activities and fulfilled their needs to complement the existing face-to-face learning mode with regards to accessing relevant learning materials, learning activities, doing assignments and interactions among each other in the online discussion forum in order to acquire new knowledge and information.

To conclude, it can be justified that the learners benefitted when using the web-mobile platforms, Edmodo and Telegram apps for the purpose of language learning-acquisition as alternative platforms while complementing the existing face-to-face learning mode with positive impact due to the reasons that the WMPs provided them with relevant language learning materials and the learners were able to interact among each other in the online discussion forum.

3.4 Sharing Information and Thoughts

Question 6 to 9 were used to seek information on the category of sharing information and thoughts from the learners. 7 out of 11 learners stated that after going through the course for one semester, their English language proficiency improved and became better than before joining the class. In addition, they mentioned that the course encouraged them to speak and wrote more in English, gained more confidence and gave them room to communicate with their other course mates. According to 3 of the learners, English language is the most important language nowadays. Next, besides learning language and communication, 9 learners mentioned that

they could share some useful information about the course, exposed them to general knowledge and current issues about the language and also a learner received information on job employment opportunities from their friends' postings. 1 learner pointed out that;

R1: *"I think I can increase my knowledge of English, but understanding of the usefulness of communicating technology can easily be learned"*.

On the question of language skills that learners would like to improve via Edmodo/Telegram apps when asked, 5 out of 11 learners said that they would like to practice more on writing skills and pronunciation in order to improve their English skills since English is the second language while another 2 learners would like to learn other foreign languages. According to 10 of the learners, the most interesting and helpful features in Telegram while learning English was the chatting features because they were able to discuss online and by doing so it increased their self-confidence in speaking because no one would see them while they were speaking when using the voice note features. The pictures/stickers' features available in the chat room made Telegram more interesting and helpful while engaging in the online discussion forum according to one of the learners.

As a conclusion, based on the category of sharing information and thoughts, it is safe to say that the learners' English language proficiency improved while engaging in the online activities. In addition, the WMPs also motivated the learners to speak and write more in English because they could interact with their classmates and gained more confidence. Furthermore, the learners were able to share useful information about the course and exposed them to current issues and general knowledge about the language. The learners would also like to focus more on writing skills and pronunciation so that they could improve their English language skills. It is important to note that the chatting features in Telegram was the most helpful and interesting features available according to the learners because it boosted their self-confidence in speaking. Along with that, the pictures/stickers' features available in the chat room made the Telegram apps more interesting and helpful for the learners to use while engaging themselves in the online discussion forum.

3.5 Willingness to Participate

On the topic of willingness to participate online (Q10-Q11), 9 out of 11 learners agreed that they would post or share relevant information to their topic in their course when they came across new information online and shared it via Edmodo/Telegram. 6 of the learners stated that on the topic of leaving messages or postings to their classmates, they would only post important messages either to ask questions or share information to their classmates which were helpful in their studies and it would be easier for them to communicate and discussed on certain topics among each other.

R1: *"post message which is useful only"*

R2: *"I feel glad that I can share some information to my classmates"*.

In summary, based on the responses from the learners indicated that they would share relevant information whenever they came across interesting topics with their fellow colleagues via Edmodo/Telegram. It is known that learners would only share important information related to the course so that they would be able to discuss and interact with one another on topics essential to their course in an ease manner.

3.6 Opinions and Comments of the Learning Content

Based on questions 12 to 14, out of 11, 9 of the learners felt that the learning content was very useful and helpful due to the fact that the information was easy to access and they managed to get a lot of information and could easily discussed with their classmates on certain topics. In addition, 7 learners believed that the learning materials posted in the Edmodo/Telegram platform were very helpful for them in doing their assignments because the messages posted in the Edmodo/Telegram platform provided them a clearer picture on how to complete their assignments. All 9 learners agreed that Edmodo/Telegram platform helped them with the class assignments. The learners mentioned that they were able to ask and discussed problems with the lecturer online easily. There were also notes given as references to guide them. At the same time, the learners also added that if they did not understand on how to do the assignments, they could post questions via Edmodo/Telegram for clarification if they were in doubt. The helpful tips, ideas and articles helped them in completing their assignments and 1 learner stated that the reminder posting in Edmodo/Telegram prepared him on what to do for the next coming meeting. In addition, another learner added that all the documents and files were easy to upload and download as well.

To sum up, therefore it can be said learners agreed that the learning content were useful and helpful to them because they were able to access the information easily and discussed with their classmates and the lecturer as well on related issues. In addition, they believed that the learning materials available in Edmodo/Telegram apps

provided them guidance to complete their assignment because they were given further explanation and sufficient information on how to prepare the assignments. The learners came to the conclusion that Edmodo/Telegram platform actually helped them with their class assignments based on the helpful tips and additional notes and materials which were accessible in Edmodo/Telegram and easy for them to either upload or download relevant documents related to the course.

4. Discussions

The outcome of this study would be able to provide some new insights on how the learning of English language can be complemented with the use of the web-mobile platforms, Edmodo and Telegram among ODLs in Malaysian higher learning institutions. However, the study was only confined to the learners' language acquisition with regards to social interactions on the usage of Telegram and Edmodo platforms, learners' familiarity to the WMPs, activities used, things learned, preferences and the materials provided, learners' suggestions on the WMPs' features and learners' willingness to participate in the WMPs. The findings of this study do not represent to other groups of ODLs in Malaysian context and especially learners in other countries. Besides, the results of the findings gained by the researcher are only confined to a particular group of open distance learners in Malaysian context. The findings of this study do not represent of the general population outside the group.

The use of the WMPs complemented each other in addition to the face-to-face meeting in the normal classroom environment. The WMPs provided opportunities, time and space for the learners to exchange their ideas in completing their assignments, learnt from one another and acquired new information and language input. The learners were able to participate in both platforms, making use of the supportive language learning materials and exchanged information and views with their classmates in the online discussion forum.

This study would be able to benefit learners and educators by providing solutions to the challenges, problems and constraints learners faced while engaging in online learning environment and it is hoped that by using the WMPs would resolve the problems that contributed to the learners' language learning process, particularly in enhancing language learning through both platforms in Malaysian ESL scenario at tertiary level. The implication of this study would be able to prepare learners and teachers and helped them acknowledge how WMPs; Edmodo and Telegram can be supportive educational tools among ODLs to assist them in managing their learning time while engaging in language learning-acquisition situation.

Future studies regarding the use of social learning platforms through Edmodo or Telegram should attempt to acquire a larger number of participants with diversify backgrounds. Besides that, other learning materials, such as mathematics, biology, arts, and other subjects, should be tested on the site as well. Time constraint is the main restriction, because with more time, additional effects or opinions can be obtained. Perceptions of teachers should also be an interesting realm of study related to the implementation of the learning platforms. Future studies should probably look into Edmodo and Telegram over a longer period with learners from several other institutions as well as with more participants and researchers from other fields besides language. The COVID-19 outbreak has drastically shifted teaching and learning situation from physical, face-to-face classrooms to fully virtual classrooms to ensure that education is still in place despite the closure of higher learning institutions. Perhaps the concept of hybrid classrooms due to the pandemic crisis, combining traditional face-to-face learning in the classroom with online learning can be seen as a trigger that would be able to stimulate the much needed online or distance learning among the ODLs.

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Appendix

Online Questionnaire

1. Which of these activities are used in the Edmodo/Telegram apps in this course?

(You can answer more than one option)

Interaction (question & answer)

Language lessons

Speaking practices

Grammar exercises

Listening exercises

Vocabulary learning

Pronunciation practices

When we are unable to meet face- to-face

2. Which of the above activities that you like most? Name any 3 activities in your own sequence of preferred activities.

3. How does the above activities benefit you in enhancing your language competency? Choose any 2-3 activities and provide a brief explanation for each activity.

4. What are other activities you would like to see and do in Edmodo/Telegram? (if any)

5. Our class used Edmodo and Telegram as alternative platforms beside class meeting for learning engagement in this course. What do you think of these platforms for the purpose of earning engagement?

(You can provide extra comments too)

Too many platforms box

Too much burden

I like class meeting without the two platforms

I like Telegram for this course

I like Edmodo for this course

I like both Edmodo and Telegram

6. After going through this course for one semester, what do you think of your English language proficiency now? * Explain why and how.

7. What are other things you thought you have learned from this course besides language and communication?

8. What are the language skills that you would like to improve via Edmodo/Telegram? Why?

9. What are the most interesting and helpful features in Edmodo/Telegram while learning English?

10. Would you post/share information relevant to your subject area (topic) you came across online in Edmodo/Telegram?

11. What do you think about leaving messages/postings to your classmates in Edmodo/Telegram?

12. How do you feel about learning the content of the course from your classmates via Edmodo/Telegram?

13. What do you think of the learning materials posted/uploaded in Edmodo/Telegram in relation to your class assignments/tasks?

14. Do you think Edmodo/Telegram can help you with the class assignment/task? How?

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