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## **Autonomous Language Learning in Self-Access Spaces: Moodle in Action.**

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### **Abstract**

Over the past few decades language educators have experienced an enormous growth in the use of digital technology, both for themselves and for their students. Along with the internationalisation and stronger business focus of education that most of us have been experiencing, many institutions around the world are now undergoing a push towards new methods of teaching and learning, which involve less face-to-face contact and more online instruction and learning. This paper takes the reader through reflections on the development of an online resource for students, of which one of the aims was to foster learner autonomy. Knowledge has been gleaned from the authors' experiences of enhancing their expertise in the use of Moodle. The rationale behind the development, as well as the background to the final choice of resources and online tools for the autonomous learning components and learner engagement are explored. The writers also reflect on the effectiveness of the site and suggest improvements for future development of autonomous language learning (ALL) Moodle sites.

*Keywords:* autonomy, Moodle, language learning, e-learning

### **Background**

In recent years there has been widespread re-thinking about teaching and learning pedagogies, places and purposes, which has had significant impact on the range of teaching and learning methodologies and learning environments that are now available to most practitioners and learners. Alongside these new learning models there has been a decrease in physical space for learning, and conversely, an increase in the 'anytime, anywhere' virtual and digital delivery of learning. Combined with this is the requirement for many teachers and advisors to upskill their knowledge and facility with e-learning tools.

Many of us in teaching or advising roles are having to contend with changing pedagogies and use of space (Lamb, 2014; Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014; Narum, 2013). Along with this of course is the rise of e-technology and e-learning through the development of e-tools. While this has the obvious benefit of making education potentially more accessible and cheaper to a wider range of people around the globe,

from a wide range of ethnicities and socio-economic groups, there are still inequalities and limiting factors such as access to technology, devices, and internet capability.

Educators in our institutions, two large polytechnics in New Zealand, are being encouraged to embed training for autonomous language learning (ALL) within courses, to enable students to become life-long learners in today's and tomorrow's world where they may assume multiple occupations and roles within their working life span. For them to flourish, they will need to have the ability to re-assess their own skills levels, set their own goals for any retraining they may consider necessary, and then be able to put these into practice, i.e., access suitable and convenient courses and use appropriate strategies to study efficiently and effectively.

While mobile technology offers the possibility of fast and ready access to many resources, it is also very important and useful because it can offer increased affordances for those who need and/or want to learn autonomously.

This paper will now discuss some considerations when creating interactive, engaging 'anytime, anywhere' ALL opportunities using Moodle and show how these concepts can be woven into practice, through examples from the authors' own experiences.

### **The Moodle Site**

The authors' institutions both provide purpose-built language learning spaces (self-access centres) with especially adapted and easily accessible resources for all levels of English, organised into skills and topics areas. Students have access to learning advisors, strategy advice, and other resources to guide their study. The purpose of this pilot project was to extend the support provided by the centre by developing and establishing online support for ALL. The student cohort in the study was both domestic and international students of English as an additional language (EAL) from intermediate level and above.

Moodle is the platform available to and supported by the authors' institutions, which is why it was chosen for the project. The aim of setting it up was to offer interactive, engaging activities to enable and support ALL, with the learning outcomes of developing study skills, expanding self-awareness, improving English, and learning skills for ALL. Another reason for creating this digital resource to encourage autonomy was to

follow our institutions' philosophy of delivering more content online so it is available to students 24/7 from a wide array of learning spaces.

The site was initially open to about 250 students and is now available to all enrolled English language students (approximately 400) to use for self-access studies, either in the SAC or elsewhere with internet access, for example, from home. This was offered as a non-assessed and voluntary component of their English language course. At the institutions, students have access to learning facilitators and their teachers, which can be especially useful for speaking and pronunciation practice. This gives them the opportunity to make use of a blended learning format, which lends itself to both undisturbed independent self-study and guided learning, and skills practice with teachers or facilitators in a self-access centre.

This paper will now describe three key activities of the ninety-seven activities within the twelve units on the ALL Moodle site (see Appendices A-C). These represent what we believe to be three important aspects of becoming autonomous: preparation, performance, and self-assessment. The first (Activity 1) aims to ensure that students are prepared by having a good grounding of metacognitive awareness at the beginning of their learning journey, the second (Activity 2) is an example of performance through learning collaboratively, while the third (Activity 3) illustrates encouragement of self-evaluation. By completing these activities learners are expected to be able to:

- identify and utilise learning strategies that accommodate their learning styles for improving their language skills,
- demonstrate an understanding of, and the benefits of, peer teaching, teamwork and collaboration,
- demonstrate a high level of personal autonomy and accountability in the acquisition and application of language knowledge and skills, as well as showing an understanding of how to self-evaluate their own learning progress.

The first activity was informed by a previous study (Dofs & Hornby, 2007) which showed that language learners tend to limit themselves to using only what they are familiar with. Therefore, the first activity described in this paper is an online awareness-raising activity for students to understand more about language learning techniques and styles: Visual, Aural, Reading/writing, and Kinaesthetic, (VARK), (Fleming, 2011), and the associated strategies.

Students complete a questionnaire and are referred to suggested strategies according to their profile. This gives them ideas of useful individual strategies for improving their language knowledge based on their prevalent style. In a follow-up task learners reflected and related what they learnt to their needs and goals. They did this by completing a self-evaluation document, provided on the Moodle site, and by linking the suggested strategies to their learning plans. This aims to enable a deeper understanding of the suggested strategies, to make their learning methods more self-evident, and to encourage future monitoring of their progress.

The second activity involves students learning something in order to teach it to their peers. According to Biggs and Tang (2007), people usually learn 95% of what they teach another person; therefore, this activity is a useful technique to enhance learning at a deeper level. Autonomous learning is about being in control of one's learning situation, e.g., where, what, and how you learn, and who you choose to learn with. This activity is an example of giving students experience of using a new strategy that they can then use themselves later as autonomous learners. The activity described here is from the listening section of the Moodle site; however, elsewhere in the site it covers areas such as: grammar items, vocabulary, and techniques for learning any of the other language skill categories (reading, speaking, and writing). The web tool, DebateGraph (Baldwin & Price, 2012), which is a form of discussion forum, was used. The DebateGraph has many useful functions that learners can utilise to share experiences and thereby extend their understanding of the concept and also discover the usefulness of such a peer teaching activity, i.e., students were directed to this website and asked to share ideas about strategies they used for learning listening skills by answering the question provided and adding comments to the mindmap. This helps reinforce metacognitive development through learning by teaching.

In the third activity, students are referred back to their original evaluation and planning sheets to reflect on their new levels of accomplishments, needs and goals, to decide what to work on next. Students re-evaluate themselves and their current language levels after each activity, and compare themselves with their original evaluations. This can help them make informed decisions about the next step in their learning journey. After re-evaluating and reflecting, students can discuss future courses of action with their peers and advisor, using the 'chat' or 'question and answer' function in Moodle. The advisor can also assist and offer advice, either synchronously or asynchronously.

## **Reflections**

Once the activities in the whole Moodle site were finalised, it was used by students for one term in order to see how it worked in practice. At the end of the term it was time to reflect on key features, shortcomings, and future improvements. Twenty of the teachers also had the opportunity to give feedback and comments at a professional development session, and nine main topics arose: (1) non-completion, (2) ALL development, (3) required language level, (4) participation and engagement, (5) peer-to-peer teaching, (6) appropriate technology, (7) techniques for learning, (8) equity of access, and (9) future evaluation.

(1) Non-completion. As all the Moodle site activities are non-assessed and voluntary, some students may choose not to complete all the components. The modules are unassessed, as students are encouraged to understand and practise self-evaluation, which is a core part of autonomous learning (Cooker, 2015; Tassinari, 2015). If desired, student completion can be tracked through the background statistics within Moodle, using the learning analytics tool. Information about students' participation rates, attempts and completed activities are given but no information about students' factual up-take and knowledge gains. To find out more about student gains, staff can actively monitor and interact with students in the self-access centre, and through learning advisor and/or class teacher appointments. Even though this is a self-directed learner resource, incentives may need to be incorporated to ensure a wide and in-depth up-take, e.g., learners could receive a document showing the completed components, or it could be a credit-bearing part of their qualification, whether that be a language course or a content-based course.

(2) ALL development. Although it is widely regarded as being difficult to detect and assess enhancement in ALL behaviour (Everhard, 2015), there were some indications that some of the students were becoming more autonomous while learning a language, as teachers mentioned that they seemed to have more self-efficacy and confidence in applying their new-found skills while finding resources. Observations by Kerstin in the self-access centre confirmed this, showing that they could use new strategies, choose appropriate styles and modes of learning, as well as make use of new language knowledge, and record it in their goal-setting forms, planning sheets, and self-evaluation logs.

(3) Required language level. The Moodle site was used by English language students at an intermediate level and above, and to make it more accessible for lower

level language users, it is currently being adapted with level-appropriate information and instructions. However, to make it more readily available to a wider audience, activities like the VARK can be combined with face-to-face sessions at lower levels.

(4) Participation and engagement. When reflecting on the activities in the modules, the authors considered that some of them were rather 'flat' and one dimensional, so these are being re-developed to be more interactive, to encourage deeper learning, e.g., using Adobe Acrobat Pro to make interactive forms. This is in line with the Equivalency of Interaction Theory (Anderson, 2003), which implies that deep and meaningful learning will take place as long as students are interacting and engaging thoroughly with either another student, the teacher, or the content. In rethinking the tasks, the best interaction pattern had to be determined according to, and aligned with, the stated outcomes for each of the tasks. For example, to reach the outcome of learning at a deeper level, a task that involves sharing ideas in the Moodle forum is suggested. The interactive nature of this helps students engage with each other while at the same time participating in a communicative learning activity using the L2.

(5) Peer-to-peer teaching. Anecdotally, some students do not want to, or simply have no time for, assisting others with their learning unless they experience gains for themselves in return. This led to our thinking about students' willingness to participate in student-student interactions, as in the peer teaching activity described above, and then a consideration of whether the activities would meet the learning outcomes for the students. For example, grammar knowledge lends itself better to a peer-to-peer interaction than learning a technique for the language skills areas. Because peer teaching of a grammar item consolidates and provides extra practice of that grammar point, tutoring others directly influences the targeted knowledge for both the peer and the peer teacher, and can be a good ALL strategy. In contrast, peer teaching of learning techniques relates more to providing teaching practice for the peers, albeit in the target language. Of course, when using this ALL strategy, there is also L2 speaking or writing practice involved, as students use spoken or written language for the instructions, even if this is only indirectly related to the targeted knowledge or acquisition of autonomy.

(6) Appropriate technology. Suitable technology for the different components needs to be chosen and aligned to certain activities and learning outcomes (Teaching at UNSW, 2015). Grammar and vocabulary, the areas most suitable for peer teaching, can be taught through collaborative practice so that students negotiate their understanding of the grammar concepts and sets of vocabulary to be included in the particular units.

Students can use wikis and/or blogs, but, according to Hughes, Toohey, and Hatherley (1992), moderated discussions can also be appropriate. The students need to have a clear understanding of the protocols and processes for interaction, and perhaps a rubric for participation in discussions, to guide and encourage high interaction levels, would be beneficial.

(7) Techniques for learning. A blended learning format may be better than a fully online mode, especially for teaching and learning techniques associated with enhancing skills in the areas of listening, reading, writing and speaking. This is because such techniques can be taught through face-to-face awareness-building activities in which these can be modelled in the language self-access centre or in the classroom.

(8) Equity of access. There were some students who did not have readily available devices, especially amongst the refugee population, so to alleviate the barrier of limited access, computers and other technological resources needed to be provided for these students. This is now being fulfilled through short and long term loans of laptops and tablets, from the language department, or through on-site usage in the self-access centre and computer labs.

(9) Future evaluation. Further evaluation of the Moodle site could involve using a list of criteria, a rubric, especially made for such a resource. An example of a suitable rubric is the Rubrics for Evaluating Open Education Resource Objects (Achieve, 2011) in which the section “Quality of Technological Interactivity” is especially applicable. Other appropriate rubrics like the “Consumer Guide” to seven strategies for online course evaluations developed by Berk (2013) and a rubric to evaluate open educational resources (OER), Temoa by Aguilar (2011), could also potentially be useful tools for evaluations.

This project, to provide extended self-access support for autonomous language learning by developing and establishing an online Moodle site, was a worthwhile experience. We can now make informed decisions about future developments of such assistance, and the students can benefit from the guided ‘anytime, anywhere’ language learning support offered. The Moodle site is constantly being up-dated and is now being integrated into the induction process for all EAL learners.

### Notes on the contributors

Kerstin Dofs and Moira Hobbs are both EAL teachers who have moved into learner advising, and have been managing self-access language learning centres in their respective tertiary institutions in New Zealand for many years. They have been collaboratively researching, presenting, publishing and helping organise conferences in the field of autonomy for the last 7 years. Both their institutions are in the process of major transformative change.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Moodle Page for Activity 1

The icons in the picture below link learners to audio files, interactive questionnaires, an online quiz (all developed by the author), and a website questionnaire (VARK).

**Learning How to Learn English**

**Do the questionnaire, quiz, and activities below to learn more about yourself and how you learn best.**

-  [Autonomous Learners are Active Rather than Passive](#)
-  [Questionnaire How do You Like to Learn?](#)
-  [Learn about your preferred learning style \(VARK\)](#)

**Learn more about your learning style through this short [quiz](#)**



 [More about learning styles](#)

Appendix B

Moodle Page for Activity 2

This shows relevant links to peer teaching through the website DebateGraph.

**Listening**

**In this section you will:**

- [Learn](#) more about how to improve your listening
- [Discover](#) some listening resources, that you can use in the LSAC, as well as learn some useful listening strategies
- [Become aware](#) of your listening ability
- [Participate](#) in this [mindmap](#) activity. You can teach something to somebody else in order to learn it better yourself. Then, in the same activity, you may [give feedback](#) to other students on their contribution.



  [Mindmap - Listening](#) 

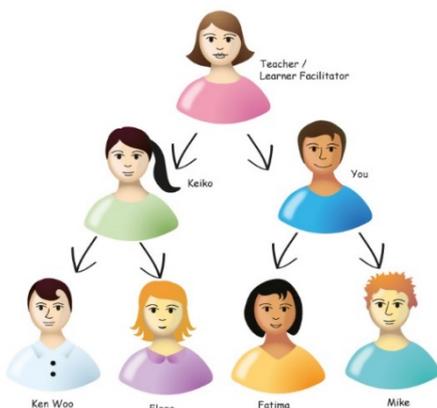
**The "Mindmap - Listening" website above is called debategraph.**

**You can use this to teach something to somebody.**

**You have to register before you can make comments and add your own ideas.**

**Tick the box "stay logged in"**

Below is an explanation of how peer teaching is being employed.



**Fan-teaching**

Fan-teaching can be used to give opportunities to students to learn at a deeper level while they teach something to somebody.

It works as follows:

The Learning facilitator (or the teacher) show two students how to, for example, use a piece of equipment, how to do an exercise, or a technique for skills improvement. Then these two students teach this to two other students and so on until all students have learnt it. It "fans out" from the starting point. It is a good example of "teaching as the highest form of learning" which is quoted on the front page.

Appendix C

Moodle Page for the Activity 3

Students can undertake on-going self-evaluation and reflection using the links in these pictures. Students re-evaluate themselves and their current language levels after each activity, to compare themselves with their original evaluations on their planning sheets. This can help them decide the next step in their learning journey.

**Planning Your Learning Journey**



-  Maybe you just want to "get on with it"?
-  Self evaluation of your language skills
-  **Needs and Goals**
-  **Unlock your potential and turn it into action - Planning**

**Unlock your potential and turn it into action - Planning**

Now, plan your learning by using the **planning sheet** below. You can fill it in and print a copy, for your reference. If you belong to the LSAC Autonomous Language Learning classes, give it to your Learning Facilitator for storage in your class folder in the LSAC.

When you fill it in, use the information from the [European Framework self evaluation](#) activity and the [Needs and Goals](#) document in this section.

Think about English language areas to focus on. Set yourself short- and long-term goals, decide a time to evaluate your progress as you go.

This way you turn your plans and potential into action.

 Interactive Two sided planning sheets pdf

Students return to the planning sheet to reflect and re-evaluate their progress



**Chat Room**

Use any of the communication opportunities below to connect with teachers and LSAC staff.

<p><a href="#">Chat room</a></p> <p>Ask Questions - Get Advice</p>	
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In the chat room staff can assist and offer advice, either synchronously or asynchronously.