Chapter 7
Exploring the Effectiveness of Online Synchronous Learning Management Systems: The Case of a Masters’ Level Academic Writing Course

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ABSTRACT

In line with calls for a more comprehensive understanding of the potentials of virtual environments for language learning/teaching, the chapter reports a study on the application of a synchronous learning management system (SLMS). The development of academic writing knowledge of a group of MA students attending an online academic writing course in a state university in Tehran was compared with that of a similar group in a face-to-face course in the same university. The analysis of participants’ classroom discussions and their writing assignments indicated that although the writing knowledge of both groups improved by the end of the course, the nature of changes differed from the online group to the face-to-face one. It is suggested that while SLMSs have opened up new horizons for the instruction/practice of language skills, their uses are largely context- and user-specific. The finding of this study feeds into research on SLMS-based foreign language instruction.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the rapid growth in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social networking over the past few decades, learning management systems (LMSs) have widely found their way into educational settings, namely higher education contexts in different countries (see Dias, Hadjileontiadou, Diniz, & Hadjileontiadis, 2017). Enabling educators to deliver the instruction and transfer the content a/synchronously, LMSs, are widely welcomed in elementary, secondary, and higher education as environments for facilitating student learning beyond the conventional face-to-face classrooms (Cheng & Yuen, 2018; Nami & Marandi, 2014). During this period, different universities and institutions of higher education across the globe have turned to the potentials of virtual learning environments for offering courses beyond the time and space limitations of the conventional classrooms (see Nami & Vaezi, in press).

Although these developments have long found their ways into the teaching profession (Ekmekci, 2015) and despite the growing proliferation of virtual environments with integrated synchronous technologies used for learning purposes, about a decade after Wang and Chen’s (2009) argument on distance learning being in its infancy in language teaching profession, research is still needed on the potential of learning management systems for language learning/teaching. Even fewer are the studies that assess the usefulness of Synchronous Learning Management Systems (SLMSs) for teaching/learning different language skills, namely writing as one of the most demanding skill especially for master and/or Ph.D. degree students in foreign language learning contexts.

In a context that other technologies such as social networking software are growing in popularity among users, it appears essential to see if LMSs still have educational rigor (see Pilli, 2014). Furthermore, as the integration of such systems grow in language learning contexts, the timely evaluation and analysis of these learning environments and their potential for language learning becomes an imperative. In an attempt to contribute to this research base, the present chapter reports a study on the effectiveness of a SLMS for academic writing instruction and learning in a state university in Tehran. The learning experience of a group of Masters of Art (MA) level students in an online synchronous course was compared with that of a similar group of students in a conventional face-to-face classroom. The following section aims at contextualizing and clarifying the way SLMS may shape students’ learning experience. It is accompanied with a brief review of the concept of LMS, its classifications, theoretical underpinnings, and research on language learning through SLMSs. The remaining parts of the chapter are dedicated to the introduction of the research context, discussion of the results, and implications for future research directions.
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