Edmodo E-portfolios in EFL – A Case Study

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Abstract

Edmodo is a free and safe virtual learning environment, helping students and teachers connect and collaborate outside the face-to-face learning time, which makes it an ideal tool to be explored and adopted by teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). Our case study will reflect on using the Edmodo Assignment feature as an ePortfolio of EFL student productions and progress. Written productions, speaking and listening contributions, which would be otherwise rather difficult to process and assess in real time, are accommodated by the platform and contribute to a finer assessment process. The outcomes and qualitative results of employing the Edmodo EFL portfolio for a mixed-ability group of undergraduate Geography of Tourism students, for two-semesters, are presented.

Keywords: Edmodo, e-portfolio, assessment, EFL.

1 Introduction

Recent research in EFL teaching/learning has demonstrated that employment of technology has manifold benefits for both learners and teachers (Chan, 2003; Genc, 2010; Karakas, 2012; Lai, 2006; Wang, 2008, 2009).

Edmodo is a free, safe version of a virtual learning environment, helping students and teachers connect and collaborate outside the face-to-face learning time. In some ways the interface is similar to Facebook as it allows teachers to create closed groups and sub-groups in order to work on different things at the same time according to students’ proficiency, share links and discuss. Moreover, polls, alerts, quizzes and homework can be set, files with grammar sheets or reading materials can be added in the library for students to access at any time, whereas posts can be filtered by different criteria, all these making Edmodo an ideal tool to be explored and adopted in EFL. E-portfolios of writing, speaking and listening contributions, which would be otherwise rather difficult to assess in real time by the teacher, can be uploaded on the platform and contribute to a finer, more objective assessment process. Our case study will reflect on using the Edmodo Assignment feature as an E-portfolio of EFL student productions and progress.

2 Edmodo Project

A group of first year mixed-abilities undergraduate Geography of Tourism students (N=37 of a total of 110) studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at Dimitrie Cantemir University of Tirgu Mures, chose to work on Edmodo, after a brief introduction of the platform by the teacher at the beginning of their two hours/week course. These project participants became Edmodo group members and uploaded their assignments for two semesters during the academic year 2012-2013, also agreeing to reflect on their experiment at the end of the year. Besides the assignments which were basically designed on Tourism English, students worked on interactive exercises, games, announcements, answered polls, and a continuous exchange of opinions, questions/answers took
place on the platform, in a desire to maximize the students’ use of the foreign language in a communicative way.

The students’ degree of satisfaction of working on Edmodo was measured at the end of the first year through a five-item questionnaire that referred to the participants’ likes, benefits, shortcomings, difficulties and outcomes of exploiting the virtual environment in their English learning, reflections being collected as the final assignment.

2.1 E-portfolio
An e-portfolio of four speaking, writing and listening activities/each semester was made available online through the Edmodo assignment feature (plus the Final survey) and modelled by the teacher, due dates being established, as well.

A selection of the writing/speaking e-portfolio activities is showcased below:

- creation of a digital leaflet using Smore (http://www.smore.com). Students designed their own e-Flyer (Fig. 1) and applied the notions acquired in the course. The added value of creating online leaflets was represented by the facility the tool offered of inserting digital images and videos while at the same time making their writing public and, therefore, likely to receive comments from the real world.

- group speaking project with VoiceThread (VT) (http://voicethread.com) (Papell, 2007). Students had to record their answers on tourism-based topics: trends in tourism (Fig. 2); flying experiences; a travelogue; basic destinations for Romanians nowadays (domestic and foreign holiday places); why should foreign tourists visit Romania; promoting a place through a story/legend; the communist tour of the town (creation of a touristic product).
creating a digital book (Fig.4) in which students described their favourite spot using http://www.pimpampum.net/bookr/. This tool enabled students to upload CC Flickr images and comment on them in writing. Students practised descriptive language and obeyed composition guidelines.

Advertising the town with Littlebirdtales - http://littlebirdtales.com (Fig. 5). This task exploited writing and speaking skills, each slide including both writing and speaking comments while at the same time applying the tourism advertising language.

3. Qualitative and quantitative results

Of the first year of Geography of Tourism undergraduate students, only 37 (34%) chose to engage in Edmodo EFL learning and assessment. Edmodo-generated statistics show that only 5 students were inactive, turning in either none or only one assignment. The rest of 32 students turned in all the envisaged assignments, thus contributing to a transparent, finer and more objective evaluation process due to the range of assessment strategies employed.

According to the end-of-the-year survey, the most interesting tasks for the students were “Advertising their hometown” and “Speaking for Tourism”, which indicates that adult students prefer tasks that are relevant to their field of specialization as well as tasks that involve creativity.

The speaking and listening tasks were perceived as more difficult than the writing ones because of technical issues involved (e.g., use of webcam, microphone) but on the other hand students appreciated they had autonomy and could decide how many times to re-record and thus improve their learning and outcomes.

Students had positive remarks on learning English with Edmodo, listing the following strong points: variety and novelty of tasks, interactivity of the site, use of the Internet in a creative way, platform user friendliness, and above all, the possibility to re-record oral productions or revise written ones until satisfied.

Students liked the creativity of this way of learning, they enjoyed to write and communicate with others in English outside the class, which is evident in the long list of Edmodo posts and comments throughout the year, and represents a crucial aspect for the progress of students learning the foreign language in an artificial environment.

Although most of the students had no problem in getting used to the novel, unconventional means of learning English with Edmodo, since a different speaking and writing tool was embedded for each activity, they found it inconvenient to create a different account each time – a shortcoming we will have to work on during the next year of the project.

For the teacher, Edmodo offered manifold benefits: assignment submissions could be viewed according to: all, ungraded, graded, not turned in or late; each student’s productions could be viewed either individually or the Progress feature could generate the whole class roll automatically (Fig.6)

**Fig. 6** Snapshot of Edmodo-generated Student progress
Limitations of these empirical findings would be the restricted number of participants as well as an Edmodo technical problem which does not allow peers to view each other’s contribution. Examples of good practice-sharing with the whole group may be desirable especially in incipient phases of assignment turning-in when the rest of students are looking for further models. This has not been possible so far unless the teacher either makes the post public (‘url’ is generated) or sends the model contribution to the group as a note. Hopefully, the Edmodo team will develop this aspect in the future.

4. Conclusions
With Edmodo, written, speaking and listening productions, which would be otherwise difficult to process and assess in real time, contributed to a finer, more formative and reliable assessment process.

Participants in this one-year, small-size, class project showed high levels of satisfaction of working with Edmodo due to their possibility of sharing ideas with colleagues, keeping pace with class progress and especially for the ability the selected tools offered of amending their productions and, therefore, enhancing their learning and grades. Despite certain technical issues, task relevance and creativity ranked high on the list of strong points of learning with Edmodo in all the participants’ responses.

For the EFL teacher, Edmodo offered effective monitoring and timely guiding, the possibility to customize activities according to proficiency level as well as to maximize all the students’ learning time by offering them a safe platform where to continue to practise the target language.

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