

Increasing L2 Language Skills with the Moodle Quiz

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to show how the quiz function of Moodle is used to allow more opportunities for participants on the site to practice language skills along with the learning of teaching methods. This report will detail two examples from our training website, group1training.renshuishere.com with screenshots of how we have incorporated these opportunities to practice, discuss the benefits of each, the caveats, and also think about future directions for allowing in-service teachers to practice much needed English language skills.

The Kanagawa Prefectural Institute of Language and Culture Studies' In-service English Teacher Training Division's mission has been the exclusive focus on the prefecture's teachers of English in public elementary, junior high, and high school. The main mission has been to introduce techniques for teaching languages informed by the latest TESOL/SLA research findings. While this has been the backbone of the program, we have seen that this mission can only be realized if we focus our energies on our second mission, and that is to improve the language ability of the English teaching faculty, especially in light of the new course of study offered by The Ministry of Education (MEXT) of Japan asking teachers to teach English in English (MEXT, 2009; Tahira, 2012). This has roused the need for teachers to focus not only on developing their knowledge of English but to use the language in the classroom. The backdrop for these institutional decisions becomes even more pressing with the need for Japan to produce a more globalized workforce to meet the demands of the 21st century economy (MEXT, 2014) and more short term goals such as the coming 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. Both of these matters call for a more functional ability of English now more than ever.

Where does e-learning fit in this picture? E-learning is defined by Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) as a "transformative moment in learning"(p. 2). It should not be seen as a traditional classroom reduced to an online form but a dynamic space where the learner becomes more responsible and self-directed in the process (p.3). On a practical level this allows access to training materials readily at any time, any place which is especially convenient for in-service teachers of English. Work constraints can prevent any devoted teacher from participating in a face-to-face class which can help to improve their skills, but if that teacher were able to access material and assignments in accordance with his or her schedule, then this is the main reason why e-learning is vital for teacher training. While access to materials is necessary, as mentioned above there need to be more opportunities for the teacher to practice their language skills. The division uses Moodle, a learning management system which is defined as "a learning platform

designed to provide educators, administrators and learners with a single robust, secure and integrated system to create **personalised** learning environments.” (“About Moodle,” 2014 emphasis was added by the author.) This personalization factor can provide environments for two distinct courses offered by the division and become a site where support materials and activities are accessible as shown in Figure 1, which is a screenshot of the main entry page. One such course is the Advanced program, a yearlong training program for teachers in high schools with three objectives: expertise in English, reflective teaching and multicultural awareness. The second course which makes full use of the Moodle site is the Support Writing Course for English teachers in junior and senior high school. The purpose for this course in comparison with the Advanced program is that the focus is only on one type of production in English, namely developing writing in terms of structure and content. The major difference between this course and the Advanced program is that it serves as a blended class. Two-thirds of the class time is performed online, whereas the Advanced program meets monthly on a regular basis in a face- to-face classroom.

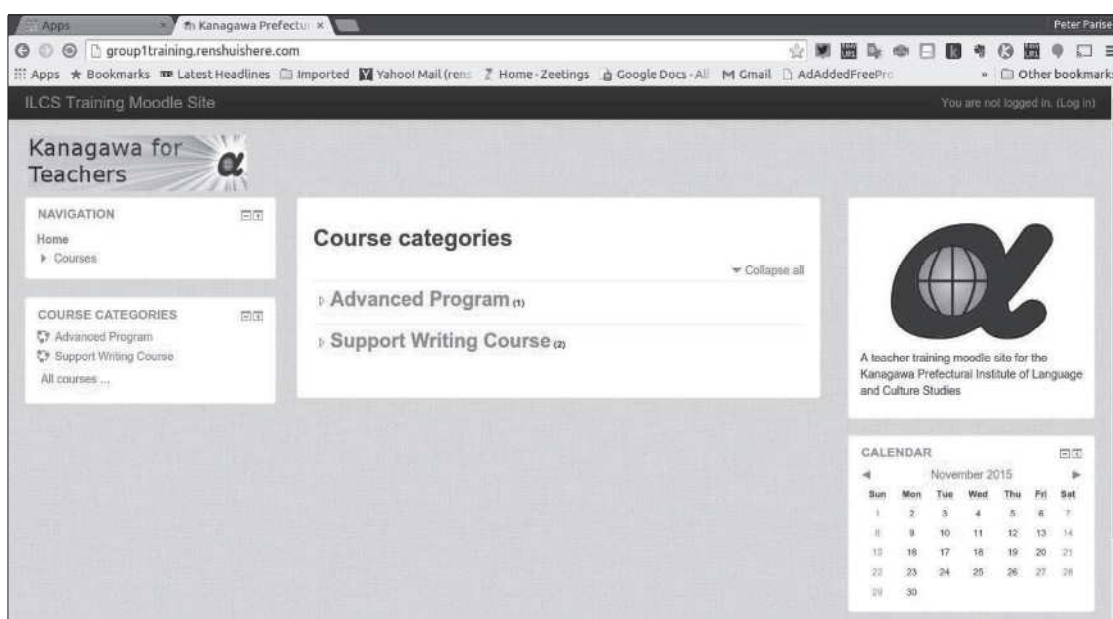


Figure 1. The main page of the Moodle site.

This article will discuss the use of quizzes for the Advanced program and on a listening lesson, a module in which both courses share for optional practice in listening. Both of these enable the participants to practice the skill of vocabulary, writing, and listening in English. Since an in-depth tour of all the quizzes and tasks available on our site is well beyond the scope of this article, only samples will be viewed and discussed to illustrate certain points.

Advanced program: Use of quizzes

The way Moodle has been utilized for the Advanced program initially since the program's inception was to provide materials for downloading, but the use of the site can also serve other purposes such as whether the participants were able to understand and recall the information they received. The main reason for including quizzes and other activities was to ensure that the participants were engaged in the reflective process not only when they come to the Academia for the training sessions but to also continue this engagement even beyond the "training" context to the context of their schools. Initially these quizzes contained discrete point items such as multiple choice or true/false questions, but over the course of the program there was a transition from only discrete point items to more meaning focused tasks.

The Advanced Program quizzes follow this procedure: First the learners attend the training session on the scheduled day, there they participate in lectures and workshops which focus on activities that demonstrate examples of best practices for language teaching and at the end of the day focus on reflective teaching by clarifying a research question and devising a treatment for their classes. The quiz would be announced a few days later using the Moodle messaging service which would be sent with a general message about the topics covered on the day and what they will expect next time. In addition, they are notified of deadlines of the quiz.

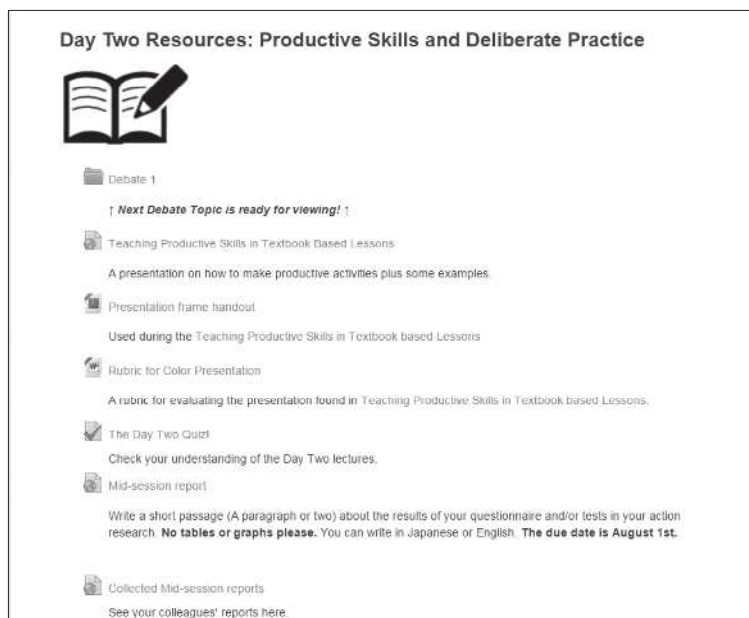


Figure 2. Resources for day 2 of the Advanced program.

Discrete point items

The Moodle quiz for the initial meetings consists of items such as true/false and multiple choice which are ideal for testing whether they recall the content of the sessions. The idea is that these questions would facilitate review for the participant of the program either in their main school, or other contexts which the teacher chooses. In Figure 2 we have a screenshot in the Moodle site which focuses on the second meeting of the Advanced program. When the participant takes the quiz they click the icon for “Day Two Quiz” to start and the page progresses to the quiz. In Figure 3 we get a sample of the first question which asks the participant to recall the information relating to the module on “Teaching Productive Skills in Textbook Based Lessons.” The participant must select the appropriate answers which coincide with the data presented in the session. The learner is then either recalls from memory, checks their notes, or consults the uploaded presentation on the site to answer the question. This question facilitates review, and enhances the retention of information communicated to the participant.

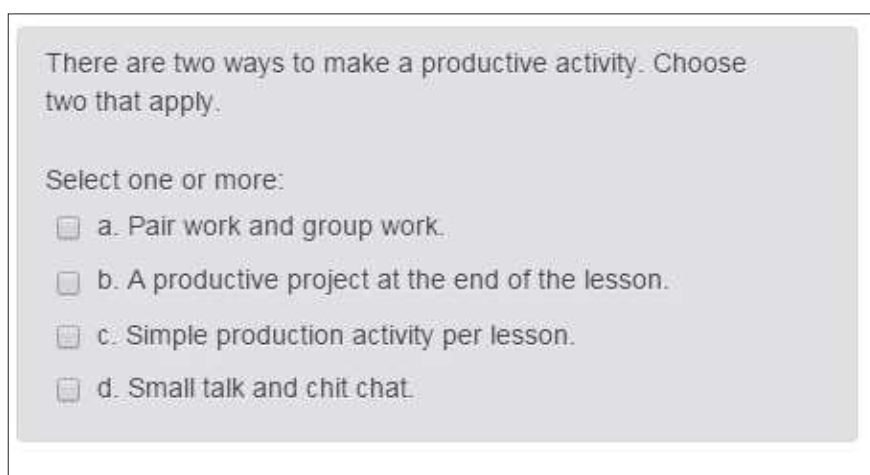


Figure 3. The first question of the quiz for Day 2 of the Advanced program.

The weakness of this approach is that this is a regurgitation of facts. If we think of the level of processing based on Blooms Taxonomy, we are making the participants exercise lower order thinking skills: remembering and understanding. Based on our observations of the participants in the program, we have noticed that teachers do the same in their own classes. In order to facilitate higher order thinking skills as defined by the taxonomy (Bloom, 1974; Krathwohl, 2002), the incorporation of tasks which involve more productive elements are necessary. The following items in Figures 4 and 5 are a demonstration of this incorporation of a productive element for writing and vocabulary. In a review of the evolution of ICT for ELT, Dudeney and Hockly (2012, p. 534) discuss the transition from stage one level CALL which

focuses on “drill and kill” activities which are based on behaviorist ideas to a more communicative, and productive mode. So too we must situate the tasks on this site to utilize the affordances available in an online environment and promote production.

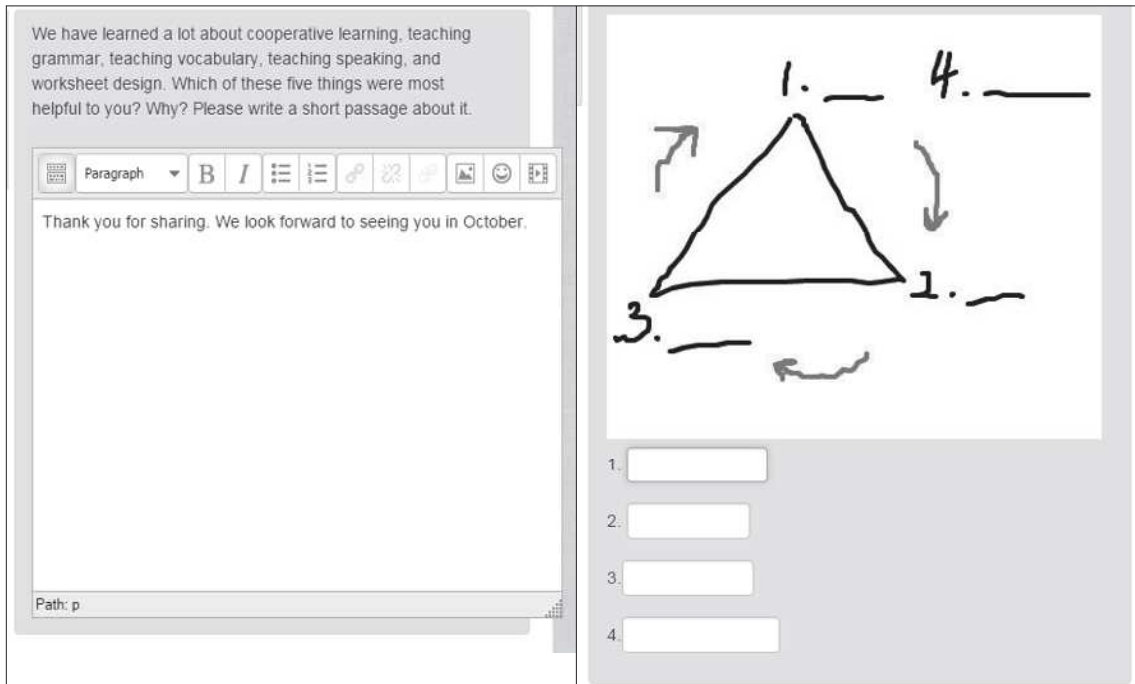


Figure 4. A productive writing item.

Figure 5. A fill-in item for vocabulary.

Productive items

In the quiz item shown in Figure 4, the participants write a response to a series of modules called the “Summer Intensive”, which is a four day series of lectures at the Academia from August 11th to August 14th. Over this period, the participants learn about and experience different techniques for teaching English. Since one discrete point item cannot encapsulate all the data presented, this question is offered to go from remembering content to actually reflecting upon the sessions. The participant is asked to reflect upon and think about which module was the most helpful for them. With this question the participant is encouraged to evaluate the content of the intensive by stating which was useful, and then give reasons why they made this choice. This question calls on the participant to respond in the L2 rather than in the L1 to promote a more productive skill: writing. The participants write a passage in English, which exemplifies *meaning focused output*, one of the necessary parts of a successful language program. (Nation, 2007) The “meaning” here refers to the reflection the participant performs in the process of responding. The intensive was something the participant had already experienced and so this has much more meaning than writing about some abstract concept. Here the

participant writes their response and gives a reason why. Afterward I would respond to their answer, offer further support by offering activity ideas, or recommend a text for more information. Also it is a good time to lend moral support as well by congratulating them for their effort.

Another type of item which is less focused on writing production and more on vocabulary is the inclusion of single word fill-in items. In Figure 5 we have a screenshot from the quiz for Day Seven. During this session and the sessions prior the participants were able to learn about and practice debate, which is regarded as an activity for practicing spoken language, and promoting critical thinking skills vital for the demands of the 21st century workplace. The participant is asked to fill in the words coinciding with the graphic organizer. This is a mnemonic for learners to remember how to organize a claim in a debate: “Assertion”, “Reason”, “Examples and/or Evidence”, back to “Assertion”. Each word corresponds to the points of the triangle, which is a shape that is “robustly” constructed and becomes the form to organize an argument. The participant is forced to recall the words which fit in this graphic organizer. This activity is best for practicing productive knowledge of vocabulary rather than receptive (Nation, 2013, p. 50). The main difference from the discrete point items mentioned above is that the words must be written directly, and so it must be recalled to fit the meaning of the letters in the acronym along with its spelling in order to complete the task. It serves as a way to remember the concept of building an argument, which can be an important tool to be used to scaffold critical thinking in a classroom activity such as debate or writing.

The quizzes enable us to collect response data to determine the difficulty, and effectiveness of the item. The data can be used to make connections between the ratings of the in-class observations, and the quality of the research reports to determine if engagement in the site facilitated the participants reflective teaching while in the program. The next section will focus on another very vital skill: listening, for the Advanced Program and the Support Writing Course.

Listening Lesson Module

This module is in the pilot phase. In addition to the tasks there is a survey for collecting the participant’s opinion about the effectiveness and usefulness of the lesson. This listening module is offered as an optional task, and that it is left to the participant’s discretion if they wish to practice. A few participants have provided valuable responses to the items in the lesson and on the questionnaire, which can help in the development of this module.

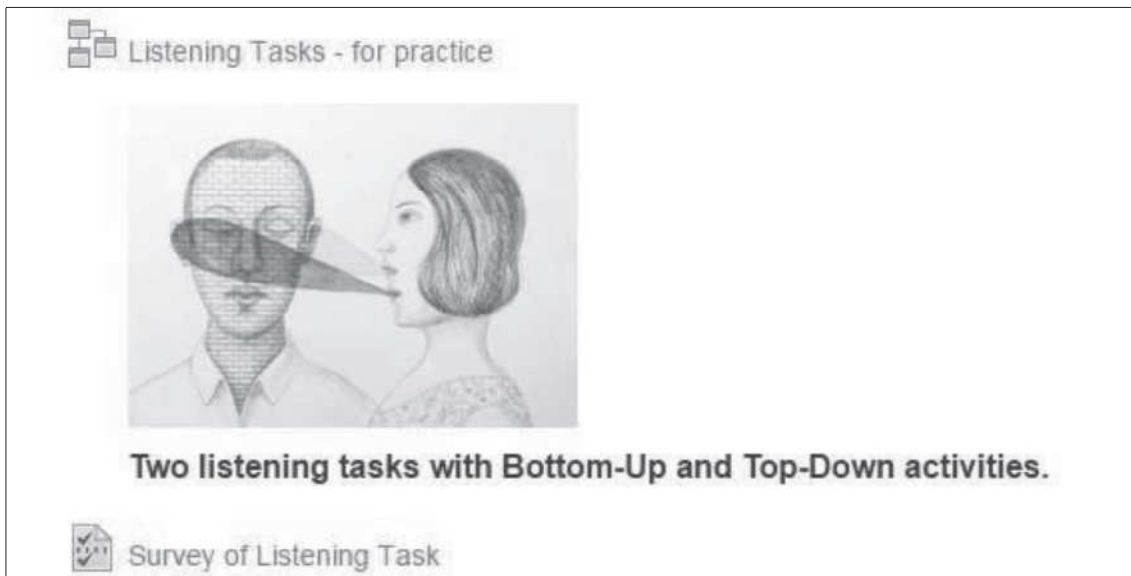


Figure 5. The icons for the listening lesson and survey on Moodle.

One main intention of the Listening Lesson is to introduce different methods of teaching listening to the participants. For the Advanced program, on Day Seven a module for teaching listening was offered to introduce ways to promote both top-down and bottom-up processing. The Listening Lesson is to supplement this module by offering more activities to these participants. Not only could they rely on the class meeting, but also the online course can supply sample tasks that the participants can adopt for their classes. The other intention is to offer practice in listening as well. By putting the participant in the role of the learner, they can get a sense of how their own students may feel when engaged in a listening task. Figure 5 shows us the icons on the page for the lesson itself. In Figure 6, the introduction page includes an icon (of the author) with an audio message describing the tasks and two buttons for a selection. The buttons are titled with two questions related to the listening task: “Is it ok for men to cry?” and “Do video games make children violent?”



Figure 6. Introduction page for the listening tasks.

The participant selects the topic of most interest to them and then progresses to a page which describes the layout of the activity as shown in Figure 7 for “Do video games make children violent?” Accompanying the instruction is another audio message by the author explaining the procedure for the bottom up task following this page and that the participant should repeat a chunk related to the audio they will hear five times while listening. The participant then clicks the button to move to the bottom-up task as shown in Figure 8 where they can find the chunks related to the audio dialogue in text with an accompanying audio clip by the author repeating the chunk twice. If the participant clicks the text, a new page opens up with a translation, or definition of that chunk. Once this part of the activity is complete the participant can continue to the next task which is a top-down processing activity. The focus on chunks rather than individual words is based on Rost, (2011) where he stated that chunks allow fuller processing of the input.

Do video games make children violent?

Listening task - Do video games make children violent?



1. Bottom-Up Task: Listening to chunks/collocations for practice
2. Top-Down task: Sequence Prediction
3. Let's listen!
4. Top-Down task: Sequence Completion
5. Some comprehension questions
6. Let's listen again - with the transcript.
7. Task Completion


Bottom-Up Task: Listening to chunks/collocations for practice

Figure 7. Task description of “Do video games make children violent?”


Bottom-Up Task: Listening to chunks/collocations for practice

Instructions: Please click the audio and as you listen, repeat the phrase out loud. Do this at least 5 times.


the other day



I think it depends



kind of a fine line



doesn't make much sense

Figure 8. Bottom-up task for “Do video games make children violent?”

Figure 9 shows pictures of two people, one German and one American, who discuss briefly an article about the effects of video games on children. The top-down task here entails that before listening to the dialogue on the next page, the participant is invited to guess the sequence of the discussion based on the statements given on the page. The participant can

assign numbers to these lines to guess the sequence. This encourages the participant to focus on the turn sequence between the two recorded interlocutors. After writing down their sequence, the participant then presses the button to progress to the next page where they can listen to the dialogue. Here there is no transcription, just the same pictures and an audio player for listening. When the participant is finished listening he or she can progress to the next page which asks them to write down the order they just perceived. Once this is done, the participant does discrete point items related to the listening and a short fill in task. These items check if the participant grasped what was said both in content and form. The final page of the task has the audio with a transcript. After completion of the tasks, the participant can try “Is it ok for men to cry?” or leave the lesson and return at a later time if needed.

Katrina from Germany

Matt from the United States

Katrina and Matt are going to discuss the question: Do video games make children violent?

The flow of this discussion are out of order: try to predict the correct order of their discussion by numbering these sentences with 1,2, 3..... Write this in the space below. Copy and Paste is ok.

☺

Katrina tells Matt about the results of the article.
Matt responds to Katrina and says his opinion.
Katrina tells Matt that she read an article about video games.
Katrina asks Matt a question.
Matt asks Katrina a question.

Your answer

Paragraph B I [List icons] [Link icon] [Image icon] [Smiley icon] [Video icon]

Figure 9. Prediction top-down task for “Do video games make children violent?”.

Another type of top-down task is the prediction activity for “Is it ok for men to cry?” Instead of ordering the interaction, the participants are asked to write a short passage describing

what each member of the dialogue believes in reference to whether it is ok for men to cry. This is an attempt to adopt productive elements in the listening lesson and promote a “4 skills” approach which integrates several skills in one activity. After the participants listen to the dialogue they then write what they heard. Nation and Newton recommend an *information transfer* activity to push learners to produce language in which the material that the participants listen to becomes the information that they will write and “retell the main ideas using a diagram or a guide” (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 49).

The material (audio and images) for both of these tasks was adopted from ello.org (Beuckens, 2015), a website devoted to developing L2 listening skills. This site allows teachers to download the mp3 audio files for use in the classroom. An important benefit to this is that the file can be altered to suit the level of the learners. In the case of this listening lesson, in order to avoid fatigue effects on listening to long stretches of dialogue, a quarter of the files from the site were utilized for the listening lesson. This was done with Audacity, an open source sound editing software (Audacity team, 2015) to select the first few minutes of the interaction. Shortening the audio clip was also done to “motivate” by offering a manageable amount of spoken interaction for listening and in so doing insure a more successful sense of task completion. In addition, in order to accommodate a wide variety of listening ability, a shorter span for listening was deemed ideal for this exercise.

Another benefit to the material adopted from ello.org is the inclusion of both inner-circle and outer-circle English speakers. In the example above, one person in the pair is from an inner-circle L1 speaking country America yet the interlocutor is from Germany. With the task for “Is it ok for men to cry?” both interlocutors are from Chile and Indonesia. These interactions go beyond the expectations of the “ideal” English speaker. For language teachers, exposure to World Englishes is necessary to enable them to break from the “native speaker syndrome” (Kachru, 2005;Yano, 2011) and see other users of English as legitimate speakers of the language where “mutual intelligibility” is the standard (Jenkins, 2012).

The tasks can broaden the participants’ repertoire of activities for their own classes. Based on our observations of English classes for the Advanced program, instructors turn on the CD and have students listen to the text without any focus nor direction. Then they follow with comprehension questions in the form of true or false questions in which the students have a fifty percent chance of obtaining a correct answer without necessarily understanding the audio input. In an online environment which included listening tasks, McBride, (2011) for example utilized a maze game as an alternate means of measuring comprehension. When building tasks for e-learning it is best to utilize the affordances of the technology such as the use of audio, video, and images to build alternate means for assessing learners.

Future directions

In order to further the language skills of the participants of our program, the affordances of an online course need to be fully utilized. One idea is to make more use of PoodLL, a suite of multimedia applications which can be installed in the Moodle website to allow audio recording, photography, video recording, and whiteboard drawing in the webpage itself. The examples presented today use this plug in. For example the recordings for the introduction and the bottom-up tasks were recorded by the author, and the diagram was done using the whiteboard function of PoodLL. What extends the potential of this suite is allowing the participant to make use of these tools as a way to respond to tasks (“About PoodLL,” 2015) which allow for other types of activities such as audio recording. For example if we think about the task discussed earlier in the article where the participant had to respond to the question of which aspect of the Summer intensive training was most useful, rather than write the response, an audio recording can be used to respond to the task orally. This allows the training to tap into a different set of skills such as pronunciation, spoken fluency, syntactic and lexical development.

Another idea relating to the adoption of PoodLL is the use of the whiteboard plug-in as mentioned above. As demonstrated the diagram had the graphic organizer with numbers of each point as shown in Figure 4. Rather than have the participants fill in the words the item describes, why not the opposite? The participant draws the diagram based on what he or she remembers and this involves more than recalling words, but redrawing the diagram as a way to demonstrate an understanding of the concept.

Challenges

E-learning, particularly for teacher training is not without its challenges. Some of these issues are related to setting up and maintaining the Moodle site itself, and the general ICT infrastructure for education in the prefecture. Regarding the website issues, proper planning and troubleshooting are necessary.

The development of items for the quiz is one such challenge. There have been instances in the quizzes administered to the Advanced program where items needed to be reworded. For example one item later in the program asked the participants to perform a statistical formula on a piece of sample data, but due to the wording of the task description, the participants responded by writing about their own research. Carelessness in item writing results in lost opportunities for the participants to benefit from practice, for the trainers’ assessment of those participants’ understanding of the material, and a loss of data vital for the Institute’s research on e-learning.

Another issue is task design which can also hinder proper assessment and data collection. One telling example was the experience of the author when building and administering the Listening Lesson described above. A link was placed in the flow of the lesson

to redirect participants to the survey when they completed the tasks. Unfortunately those participants missed one vital step, a button which was placed to mark the end of the lesson. Due to this rerouting, the participants were not able to save their data and a wealth of information was lost which could be used for assessment. A second related issue is the dependence on plug-ins for multimedia browser functions such as audio and video viewing. PoodLL needs Adobe Flash to function, and if the participant is using a computer without an updated version of the plug-in, this might hinder their ability to hear, see or record material on the Moodle site. The Listening Lesson has had two respondents report that they were not able to hear certain portions of the lesson, which could be related to either a flaw in the website itself or in their device, and finding the cause takes a lot of detective work to determine a solution.

A larger issue relates to the IT infrastructure of schools in Kanagawa. Based on our experience with the Advanced program and reviewing the site logs of those who visit the Moodle site, it seems that access through the participants' schools can have a great deal of variation. Some can access the website entirely, while other participants have reported that sections of the site were unavailable such as the ability to download files, view video and audio, and access material utilizing Google forms. For example, when visiting a school within the prefecture to give an off-site lecture where ICT was to be in use, the author found that Google.com was entirely blocked from access on all the computers of the school, yet Yahoo.co.jp was fully accessible. Computer security is important, but the downside to being overwhelmingly secure is that students and teachers are denied access to online services which can enrich English pedagogy. E-learning for teacher training cannot grow in such an environment as long as this continues.

Conclusion

The use of Moodle can go beyond just checking for understanding and promote higher order thinking skills and opportunities to improve language ability. With the quizzes for the Advanced program, checking for the participants' understanding of concepts also gradually introduced opportunities for practice. The writing sections and the vocabulary fill-in sections encourage learners to use the skills the trainers would like them to adopt in their own classes and by having them experience production activities in face-to-face meetings, the online counterpart can also encourage this as well, and so broaden their exposure. The Listening Lesson, which is offered to both the Advanced and the Support Writing Course also provides skill development and include ways to go beyond the conventional method of teaching listening by introducing top-down and bottom-up techniques as well as practice at the same time.

There are future possibilities for more productive skills such as speaking through the PoodLL suite, which offers plug-ins for teachers and students to record their voice or take a

video for speaking practice, or test alternative forms of comprehension such as drawing via an online whiteboard. But due to technical issues such as item writing, website development, and lack of an adequate infrastructure, the ability to do these things may be limited until some changes happen in the near future.

The In-service English Teacher Training Division of the Institute has a unique position by being connected with schools in the prefecture. The division consistently visits schools for off-site lectures and classroom observations of the Advanced program participants and as a result has a deeper understanding of the teachers' needs compared to an outside consulting body. The use of Moodle for teacher training is also informed by this position. E-learning opens a lot of opportunities for teachers, for trainers, and for research. As more and more teachers strive to meet MEXT's recommendation to conduct lessons in English for their classes, the opportunities to obtain up to date methods informed by TESOL/SLA research along with a chance to improve their ability to use the language is more and more vital in the years to come. E-learning allows the English teacher to access the material at school or at home, so they are not tied down to just the context of the "training center" but always connected by what is offered on the Moodle website. The mission of the In-service English Teacher Training Division is clear. Offering face-to-face workshops along with online resources meets the needs of teachers burdened with work and families. Providing an opportunity online to supplement our workshops with follow up material, or as a blended class like the Support Writing Course, allow teachers to focus on professional development more than ever.

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