Moodle E-learning in English as a Foreign Language Programs (EFLP) at English Language Centres (ELCs) in Colleges of Technology in e-Oman

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become integral part of every aspect of modern life. ICT has penetrated into the field of Science, Politics, Economics, Humanities, Education and so on. One cannot do away with ICT and its tools in his/her field of choice. So also is its relevance to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching and learning. Moodle e-learning is one of the ICT driven interactive Learning Management Systems (LMS) that is being used widely across Colleges and Universities in creating academic courses and delivering them to learners in general. Moodle e-learning specifically is installed and used in all colleges of Technology in Oman. It’s applicability to EFL lesson delivery along with the traditional face-to-face lesson is being tried these days. The researcher therefore attempts to shed some light on the concept and possibilities of Moodle eLearning in terms of ICT based EFL/ESL teaching and learning practices in Oman as the selected field of his study. Relevant literature review and the researcher’s own exposure to the Moodle eLearning system in Oman have contributed to the content of this paper.
1. Introduction

The modern day or ‘millennial’ students are becoming more and more techno savvy in their living and learning environment. They are faster and better informed than any other students of past generations. They come across bulk information of every kind through high tech means of information technology. They often interact with the rest of the world using a multimedia format including internet and on-line activities – social networking, chat, podcasts, video, PowerPoint etc. Twenge (2014) described Generation Y (the modern day students) as the first generation to be fully raised in the aftermath of the technological revolution in which information has been readily available to them with the click of a mouse.

In the context of such high tech learning environment, it’s necessary for both teachers and students to get updated, equipped and involved with technology in education especially in EFL. They must incorporate such technologies in facilitating English Language learning. The use of Internet has given an immense opportunity for teachers and students to interact with each other in particular and with the world in general. CAL (Computer Assisted Learning) has contributed considerably in this direction. The evolving technical and technological scenario, especially in some developed countries of the world, has almost replaced the traditional classroom with a virtual global learning situation without a face-to-face interaction. Its impact is being seen in advancing countries where system of education is competing with the rest of the educational system of the developed world.

E-learning has become a widely accepted approach to knowledge acquisition and academic pursuit with immense potential for enhancing autonomous learning. It is no longer viewed as a trendy fad.

2. Technology and language learning

Zhao (2005) mentions that exposing language learners to authentic target language is one of the best ways of increasing their language proficiency. However, many EFL learners at different parts of the world do not have the opportunity to use the authentic English. Such lack of exposure is true even in the Middle East in general and Oman in particular. Technology can fill that gap to some extend enabling learners to engage in interactive activities on their own time.
and pace. Information and Communication Technology therefore enable the learners to communicate with English (Warschaure & Kern 2000), and it has also altered the role of teachers as facilitators encouraging the learners to engage in discussion with their peers and e-learning participants in English rather than passive recipients of the language. The incorporation of technology in the teaching of English therefore will enable the students as they engage themselves in managing their own learning process and making their own understandings through different electronic resources and tools.

The studies by Liaw, et al. (2007) found that e-learning has enriched the learning and teaching experiences of many college and university students and teachers respectively. The introduction of learning management systems (such as Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle, etc.) influenced the development of e-learning in colleges and universities. (Alexander & Golja, 2007; Coates, et al., 2005). According to Unger & Wroblewski (2006), more than 3000 students from different universities were surveyed about their usage of e-learning management systems; 60% percent of participants reported using e-learning “sometimes” or “frequently” in Business as their specialization. 30 – 40 % of participants in other subjects reported as ‘sometimes’ or ‘frequently’. Some areas of research in the field of e-learning until recently are the learning with specific leaning management system, interaction with teachers through e-learning or some specific features of the course (Alexander & Golja, 2007; Coates, et al., 2005). This points towards the need for researches in e-learning in the field of EFL or ESL as the use of e-learning platforms has increased considerably in recent years.

3. E-learning: Definition

E-learning is defined by researchers in different ways. It is defined as computer mediated technology which is used to facilitate teaching and learning (Waterhouse, 2003). European Commission (2001) defined e-learning as a medium of instruction and interaction, which could be used for uploading and sharing different resources synchronously or asynchronously. It can work in a collaborative manner even remotely. Sangra (2012) mentioned that e-learning is considered as distance learning, online learning and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) incorporated learning to deliver lessons and materials. The role of technology and computers are emphasized in all the definitions.
Five types of eLearning can be identified from literatures. They are: a) telementored, b) learner-led, c) facilitated, d) instructor led and e) embedded (Gulbahar, 2009; Horton & Horton, 2003; Kokkosis, et. al., 2006; Illie&Pavel, 2006). Telementoring is the method where the learners are given printed study material; and the instructions and guidelines are given through videos through electronic platforms (Gulbahar, 2009). Learner led e-learning is the method where learners are given learning materials and learners work on the materials mostly on their own. The facilitated e-learning allows the learners to involve in discussions through Forums and Chats related to the topic of the course (Ilie&Pavel, 2006). Instructor led e-learning contains videos, real-time webcasts and instructors’ presentation on topics to help the learners carry out their studies. This also includes video conferencing, audio and white-board applications (Esgi, 2013). The embedded e-learning provides students with video and resources in the forms of relevant web-links. This enables the learners to get better and deeper knowledge in the relevant assignments.

Moodle e-learning in this article refers to the use of Moodle software used especially at tertiary educational institutions- Colleges of Technology in the Sultanate of Oman to encourage teaching and learning in terms of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

4. Electronic Oman (e-Oman) in Electronic Middle-East (e-Middle East)

According to Internet World Stats (2009) the Middle East as a region ranks third from the bottom in percentage of the population using the Internet, and the distribution of resources is highly uneven. The UAE leads the GCC with 59.6% of its population using the Internet. The other Gulf nations, except for Oman, which at 13.7% is well below the world average of about 23% usage, are classified as countries possessing a medium Internet penetration rate with Saudi Arabia at 25.1% (2008), Bahrain at 34.8%, and Kuwait at 33.4%. Both Qatar and the UAE, however, are now classified as highly penetrated countries. Internet and population Statistics (ITU-International Telecommunication Union, 2010) records that out of the population of 2967,717, Oman has 1236,700 internet users in 2010 witnessing a growth of 41.7% of population using internet in 2010 from 3.8% of population using internet in 2000. Albanumy, et al. (2005) points out in his research that Saudi Arabia and Oman have realized the importance of E-government, and E-government initiatives are taken with main objectives focused on...
improving IT infrastructures, supporting the country’s economy, E-learning, E-Government and E-Health, improving productivity at low cost, setting up standards and guidelines for a national network, developing a security framework and the preserving of the society’s characteristics in a digital age.

As part of the e-Oman initiative for instance, applications for 2006/2007 higher education (public and private) places have been merged under one unified online system (Higher Education Admissions Center). Each higher education institute publishes the minimum entry requirement for each of its degrees and the student selects his or her choices in order of preference. When the Ministry of Education publishes secondary school results in mid July, these results are fed automatically into the system and offers are made in early August. Prior to the new system, the students had to submit their papers to the different institutes by themselves after the publication of results. The process was very inconvenient for the students and the admission departments as there was very little time and students had to travel a lot.

Oman being an emerging modern nation in the Middle East has much scope for incorporating e-learning in education especially in the field of ELT as it gives more emphasize on electronic platforms to promote nation building. E-Oman, (the Sultanate of Oman’s e-Governance initiative, is built on His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said’s vision to create a Knowledge Society in Oman. Spearheaded by the Information Technology Authority (ITA) which is affiliated to the Ministry of National Economy (MoNE), eOman aims to create an effective government-community-citizen infrastructure that provides better public services to people, resulting in a meaningful information flow between the government and citizens.

E-Oman’s mission is to create a Knowledge Society in Oman and transform the Sultanate into a knowledge-based Economy. Whether one is a citizen, resident, visitor, business enterprise or government entity in Oman, e-Oman offers him/her a wide variety of convenient, cost-effective and customer-oriented electronic services that will empower him/her and transform his/her life for the better.E-Oman will leverage ICT for economic and social gain to enrich the lives of the people of Oman. Integrating government departments to provide better and more efficient public services, helping people acquire ICT skills required to live in a knowledge society, helping businesses save more time and money through smart electronic services,
developing local ICT industries, building a secure foundation for e-Commerce transactions and minimizing the Digital Divide are some initiatives undertaken by e-Oman.

Some e-Oman services presently under development are: Government Convergent Network, Government Nervous System, Government e-Services Gateway (UBAR portal), Institutions Data Bank, People Data Bank (National Registration System), e-Payments Infrastructure (EFT, RTGS etc.), Geographical Information Systems (GIS), and E-Mail Services. ITA has worked closely with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and provided its consultancy in the development of the security architecture and shared best practices in order to align the initiative with the overall Digital Oman strategy.

MoHE has built the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) System to unify the admission process in all higher education institutions. From 1st of April 2006, the system is accessible online and students who have completed their General Certificate Examination can apply for higher education through this system. Application from potential candidates can be submitted online through the website www.heac.gov.om. The HEAC system can gather the students’ details based on their General Certificate Examination registration number. The applicants will then be allocated to the appropriate program in each institution according to their program of choice and their grades. The system will direct these applicants to appropriate higher education institutions such as the Sultan Qaboos University, Higher Colleges of Technology and various other private colleges, institutes and training organizations in a seamless manner. Considering the mission and vision of e-Oman, the introduction and integration of electronic learning system in English Language Program is inevitable.

5. Moodle e-learning at Colleges of Technology in Oman

The e-Learning Site was established in 2009 (elearning@act.edu.om) as an extension program of the Educational Technology Centres of the Colleges of Technology. Its mandate is to provide educational opportunities to individuals who are aspiring for advanced learning and improved qualifications but who are unable to take advantage of traditional modes of education. The e-Learning Site provides quality higher and continuing education to Omanis through distance learning. Its mission is to give its students informal education, as well as to develop discipline and capability to become lifelong learners at anytime and in any place of
today's knowledge society. These e-learning facilities do help the students to blend it with their face-to-face learning at the colleges.

Introduction of Moodle in the colleges has enhanced the implementation of e-learning. Moodle is an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment; a program which educators can use to create web pages. Moodle can be used to create an informational web site or an interactive learning environment online. ELC teachers are given time-to-time orientation to the program by the ITC departments in the respective colleges. The students can upload their assignments, take the test/quizzes and interact with their course/classmates and teachers. The program is accessible at off college hours also. The teachers can upload the documents or study materials for the students. The students can either download them into their personal computer or print them. It not only exposes them to an interactive learning environment but also familiarize them with the technology involved. The students can interact with the teachers through emails or live chats in the program.

Thus students do the work anywhere anytime, and as the system disable late submissions, the deadline date can be met. The uploading of notes, assignments, and etc. function like the email attachment operation. The Moodle at Omani Colleges of Technologies is to be used to its full potential despite a few limitations experienced in using this computer technology.

6. Electronic ELCs (e-ELCs) in Colleges of Technology

Considering the significance of e-learning, English Language Centres across colleges of Technology in Oman are well equipped with e-learning and e-interactive facilities. For example, the infrastructure available to the staff and students of the ELCs in Colleges of Technology as a tertiary educational institution is one of the best in Oman. The teachers can use the facilities innovatively to facilitate interactive teaching - learning experience par with the demands of modern of technological system elsewhere. For instance, all colleges have several user-friendly internet-intranet facilities available for both students and staff. Currently the following in-house developed or adapted systems are available: a) Online Registration System, b) e-Brary System, c) Staff information System, d) Student Advisor Absenteeism system, e) Online Surveys, f) Webmail for students and staff g) Foundation and Academic module and h) Moodle interactive program. Prior to the introduction of Moodle in the college, the staff and students have been
using CD ROMs, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), Language Labs for English Language teaching and learning.

In addition to the above mentioned features, Moodle interactive program at the Colleges can be used for blogging, chatting, taking quizzes, messaging and so on. The tools in the Moodle can be enabled; and students can use them for interacting with the teacher, uploading and publishing their project and writing, taking quizzes and so on. Thus students will get a good start at blogging through Moodle as it is very much learner friendly.

![Moodle E-learning at ACT](https://www.act.edu.om/elearning/retrieved on February 13, 2012)

**7. Learning theories supporting Moodle e-learning**

The following adult learning theories and their principles (http://lynnmunoz.me/learning-theories/adult-learning-theory/) can be employed in finding out the effectiveness of Moodle-learning in the colleges of technology in Oman. The principles of adult learning theories such as Action Learning, Project Based learning, Experiential learning, Self directed learning and transformational learning are used to support e-learning. Lieb (1991) lists six characteristics of Adult learners. They are: a) adults are autonomous and self-directed; b) they have accumulated a foundation of life experience and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family
responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to their knowledge/experience base, c) adults are goal oriented, d) adults are relevancy oriented, e) they are practical, focusing on the aspects of lesson most useful to them in their work, and f) adults need to be shown respect. “Electronic Portfolios can foster transformation in teacher beliefs through critical reflection, ownership, and personal agency” (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007, p.488).

According to ‘Emerging’ (2002) Moodle e-learning is based on the principles of constructivist-focused, online teaching, interactive learning, collaborative learning, facilitating learning, authentic learning, learner-centred learning, and high quality learning. For example, “students may enter into either synchronous or asynchronous discussions throughout the course via chats, blogs, wikis, threaded discussions, or email. This collaboration leads to shared knowledge and higher critical thinking skills. The instructor’s role is to facilitate learning, support learners, monitor their learning, and to provide directions and guidelines for learners” (“Emerging,” 2002, p.1).

Moodle e-learning helps learners especially adult learners to interact with learning material, create materials and share them with others. Moodle e-learning supports this method of learning though its different tools and resources. According to Rice (2206) Moodle e-learning employs flexible array of module resources and activities to create five kinds of course materials such as a web page, a text page, a link to anything on the web-page, a label that displays any text or image and a view into one of the course directories; and six kinds of interactive course materials such as choice, journal, assignments, lesson, survey and quiz. This also has five activities enabling the learners to interact with each other through glossary, chat, forum, workshop and wiki. According to Thomas N. Robb, (TESL e2004) Moodle therefore has many features of language learning; for example, Moodle’s quiz-making function allows teachers and students to make different types of quizzes which are relevant to language teaching and learning. Multiple choice, Cloze, Matching, True/False, Description and Numerical.

8. Moodle tools and activities for EFL/ESL learning

Moodle employs many e-tools enabling EFL/ESL practitioners to incorporate them in their lesson delivery. A few of them are listed here for examples. Most of these activities and
tools can be utilized for English Language Teaching involving students in collaborative learning or autonomous learning (elearning@act.edu.om).

**Forum.** Forum or Online Forum Discussion (OFD) is an important Moodle e-learning tool. It enables the teacher to post number of topics for discussion, and the participants post their views on the topics synchronously or asynchronously. This enables them to use EFL interactively through electronic writing. Students get opportunities for peer checking and correction. Teachers can monitor the discussion as a moderator.

**Forum in blog format:** It’s another Moodle forum format where student can write asynchronously in the form of blogs. It can be considered as a substitution for traditional paper-and-pencil writing. Teacher or peers can post their feedback on the students’ blogs. This is yet another potential tool for enhancing the learners’ EFL/ESL proficiency.

**Chat:** This activity/tool helps the learners to involve in text-based synchronous real time learning through discussions. Students can discuss on topics and acquire knowledge from their friends or classmates without teacher interruption. They can exchange ideas and experiences enabling them improve their fluency of using real-time English.

**Assignment:** This tool enables the students to upload their assignments meeting the deadline. Teachers can correct the assignments; give feedback and grade them to students virtually.

**Choice:** The choice is the Moodle tool by which teacher posts a single question to the participants to make a selection. This facilitates students’ thinking skills through the use of English language being exposed to others’ views and opinion.

**Database:** The database activity module enables participants to create, maintain and search a collection of entries (i.e. records). The teacher defines the structure of the entries as a number of fields. Database enables students to read the documents and listen to audio material improving their grammar and pronunciation skills in English Language.

**Glossary:** The Glossary enables the learners to create and maintain a list of vocabulary with their definitions as of a dictionary, and it also help them collect and organize resource for their learning. This glossary can be shared among their friends or other participants. This is a very useful tool in EFL context that the learners can acquire more and more vocabulary and make a
list of them with their definition. Vocabulary acquisition is very important for ELL (English Language Learning). Students can organize the words according to different topics of their lessons.

**Hotpot:** Teachers can distribute interactive learning materials to students through Moodle with EFL instructions. Students can read or listen to the teacher-uploaded materials and write their responses in line with the teacher instruction. Teachers can upload audio or visual prompts with instructions enabling the learners to respond to them using EFL as the Target Language. All the four language skills are stimulated through this tool.

**Lesson:** This tool enables the teachers to deliver content oriented practice activities to students in a student-friendly and flexible manner. Such activities include multiple choice, matching and short answer questions. EFL practitioners can use this tool to give students language practice on relevant contents.

**Quiz:** The Quiz activity tool is yet another important Moodle e-learning tool enabling the teachers to create quizzes for the learners and grade them. Teachers can set a timeframe for the quizzes, and provide correct answers. EFL quizzes as True or False, Matching and choosing, Fill in the blanks etc. can be set using this tool. EFL vocabulary, meaning, Grammar, spelling and content can be assessed through this e-learning tool.

**SCORM Package:** SCORM (Sharing Content Object Reference Model) package is files and content displayed on numerous pages enabling learners browse through those pages. This package includes multimedia, reading content and animations creating increased learner exposure to the EFL language. Learners can access these files anytime, and listen, read and write in the target language.

**Workshop:** This tool enables the learners to upload their word-processed files for their peers and teachers to review. They can also directly write their work on the text-space. This tool can help learners enable their EFL writing skills in particular. It helps them learn from their peers, and the participants can keep themselves anonymous in submitting their work for feedback and giving feedback.

**Wiki:** The Wiki activity enables participants to add and edit a collection of web pages. A wiki
can be administered in-group enabling all the participating students to edit and add to the web-pages. The use of Wiki encourages students to write and read each other’s work exposing them to real-time language use.

9. Moodle Resources Focused on EFL

Moodle e-learning comes with tools to create and maintain resources aimed at different courses in general and EFL in particular. These resources help EFL/ESL learners to access the resource on their own pace enabling them to develop their English language proficiency. These resources are in different forms tailoring to the different learning styles of the participants involved in English language learning. The following types of resource tools are used in Moodle e-learning.

Folder: This resource tools enables the teachers to share and display a number of related files inside a single folder reducing scrolling time on the course page. For example, EFL teachers can create separate folders for grammar, vocabulary, spelling, essays and essay topics, etc. It will ease the learners’ of their time and effort in choosing the required resource.

File: Teachers can provide students with a file as course resource-EFL resources in this context. Teachers can share their handouts, worksheets and presentation slides used in the classrooms with their students.

Book: Teachers can create a multi-page resources in a book like format with chapters and sub-chapters. Books include text and multi-media files. EFL teachers can upload storybooks and such learner friendly books for pleasure reading supporting their language learning.

Label: This resource could be used to divide a long list of activities with sub-titles or an image. Text and multimedia are inserted in the EFL course page in between links to other activities and resources by using this resource tools. This enables the EFL participants to display and to use embedded sound files or video directly on the course page with a short description on the section.

IMS content package: This enables the teachers to upload and display a collection of files in a pop-up window, with a navigation and menu or buttons. This resource tool can be used to present
animations and multimedia content, and other contents, which could be uploaded as a zip file. This can be of much help to EFL students and teachers in English Language Teaching and Learning (ELTL).

**URL:** The URL resource module helps EFL teachers to provide a web link as an EFL/ESL course resource. EFL documents, relevant images, web-pages or anything that is freely available online, may be linked to the students through this resource tool.

**Page:** Through this resource tool, teachers can use the text editor to create a web page resource displaying images, web-links, video, sound and embedded codes, for example Google maps. EFL teachers can use this tool to display the course guidelines and summary, and to embed different sound or video files with some description of the text.

### 10. Advantages and Disadvantage of Moodle E-learning

This section discusses the analysis of advantages and disadvantages of Moodle e-learning from the literature review and the researcher’s own experience of using Moodle e-learning with his students.

**10.1 Moodle E-learning: Advantages**

A careful analysis of Moodle e-learning will let the audience understand its merits in relation to EFL/ESL. They are summarized in the following points.

- Moodle e-learning increases students’ exposure to language learning over the period of time (Suliman, 2014) resulting in their enhanced linguistic proficiency.
- Different e-learning resources and activities on Moodle e-learning improve students’ language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- According to (Wu et al., 2012), ‘an integrated learning environment’ is created through Moodle E-learning where students engage in different tasks. Strong learners and slow learners can work according to their needs either faster or slower (Nedeva&Dimova, 2010) promoting learner autonomy.
- Moodle E-learning is an interactive and learner friendly medium of teaching and learning.
Moodle e-learning enables and equips the learners for their future job-market helping them acquire attributes, attitudes and skills that are required in the technology oriented future (Irwin D, 2012) especially English as the lingua-franca of the day.

Due to its connectivity and exposure to the World Wide Web, the learners are motivated as they are exposed globally (Meloni, 1998). Moodle e-learning provides EFL learners to use the language in real-life situation across the globe.

Moodle e-learning has a huge impact on the learners’ different learning styles. It gives opportunity for learners of different styles to use English. Different resources and activities provide chances for shy, active and passive learners and so on. For example, students who are introvert in face-to-face classrooms can involve in chats and Forums, blogs on Moodle e-learning to enhance their communicative and writing competency along with students who are extroverts.

Teachers can save time in administering the course, reproducing the materials, and reducing cultural differences that happen during face-to-face teaching.

Administrators can reduce the cost of the production of teaching materials.

10.2. Moodle e-learning: Disadvantages

Moodle e-learning is not without its disadvantages. Despite the above advantages of the Moodle –eLearning one can identify the following disadvantages too.

- Lack of body language and face-to-face tutoring may pose some difficulties to some learners.
- The electronic feedback and description may not be sufficient for the learners as they are very much used to traditional face-to-face teacher feedback.
- Lack of internet access is yet another demerit of Moodle e-learning. The students who do not have Internet access are disadvantaged over the students who have round the clock net-access.
- New learners who lack computer skills may not appreciate Moodle e-learning as it is especially in the absence of teacher support (Nielson, 2011)
- The social relationship among students is negatively affected due to the virtual nature of Moodle e-learning (Han & Johnson, 2012).
Moodle e-learning is unsuccessful in institutions which do not have enough computer labs and e-learning accessibility.

**Recommendations and conclusion**

Considering the technological advancement in e-Oman and the implementation of Moodle e-learning courses across the colleges of technology in Oman, the researcher recommends the use of Moodle e-learning in EFL lesson delivery. Though it cannot replace face-to-face method of teaching, Moodle e-learning can be blended with face-to-face teaching. For example, Moodle e-learning is increasingly used at Al Musanna College of Technology (ACT) under Omani Ministry of Manpower (where the researcher is conducting his study) in Oman (Figure 1). Teachers and students have responded to the program very positively. According to Garrison & Vaughan (2008) integrated curriculum through e-learning and face-to-face teaching can make learning more participatory, interactive and student-centered. Moodle e-learning opens opportunities for students to engage in learning activities outside the classrooms giving the more exposure to the use of English language resulting in increased language proficiency. Administrators and stakeholders should create effective e-learning policies to implement the program at the college level. Colleges should be well equipped with sufficient number of computers and computer labs. Teachers should be trained in setting up and administering Moodle e-learning course. Students also should be given enough training in using the program. Researches on the use and effectiveness of Moodle e-learning tools (for example Appendix A) on EFL teaching and learning should be undertaken especially as there are not enough research-literatures in the field. The studies can focus on the effectiveness of Moodle e-learning on different language skills such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Teacher-student perspectives on Moodle e-learning in Oman can be one of significant areas of the study.
Moodle e-learning therefore can supplement face-to-face classroom teaching in Oman. Various activities and resource that are offered by Moodle e-learning can surely advance Omani EFL learners’ English language proficiency. Moreover, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is fast growing in Oman, and the learners need to be equipped for the national technological and economic requirement. The introduction and implementation of Moodle e-learning is a right step towards nation building in creating technically advanced and English proficient graduates from colleges of Technology in Oman.

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Appendix A

Figure 1: A possible Moodle-incorporated Research Design
References


http://www.ijellh.com