

Perceived and Actual Effectiveness of Easyclass in Jordanian EFL Tertiary-Level Students' Grammar Learning

Mais Mayyas
Ministry of Education, Ramtha, Jordan

Ruba Bataineh
Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

ABSTRACT

This study examined the potential, actual and perceived effectiveness of the Easyclass Learning Management System in developing Jordanian university students' grammar learning. A pre-/post-test, a questionnaire, and an interview schedule were used to collect data from a purposeful sample of 39 Jordanian students who were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group (n=17) and a control group (n=22). Both groups received the same face-to-face instruction, but the experimental group received supplementary out-of-class instruction through Easyclass. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test, while the students perceived Easyclass as highly effective in EFL grammar learning.

Keywords: *Easyclass, effectiveness, grammar, INU, perceptions*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Technology is far from new to education, but its use (for example, tape-recorders, video-cassette players) has traditionally been limited to the classroom (Yaman, 2010). Computers have been used in language teaching and learning since the 1960s (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). With the Internet boom in the mid-1990s, websites had been used in language learning, but their capabilities were still more rudimentary. A need for developing software which can provide informed analyses and feedback has led to the advent of a host of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) which, unlike other technologies, potentially facilitate a variety of functions (Levy, 2009).

An LMS is a software application that utilizes the Internet as a tool to facilitate teaching and learning. A host of LMSs, which are either proprietary (such as, Blackboard, Desire2Learn, eCollege) or open-source (such as, Canvas, Easyclass, Moodle, Sakai), are used by institutions of learning to create and deliver learning content, monitor student participation, and assess student performance (Al-Busaidi & Al-Shihi, 2010; Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Livingstone, Kemp, Edgar, Surridge, & Bloomfield, 2009).

Research (Blake, 2013; Lin, 2009; Resta & Laferrière, 2007; Zhao, 2003) further suggests that technology plays a key role in providing authentic contexts for foreign language, especially for those who are unable to study abroad. Thus, the need arises for technology which supports language teaching and learning and develops language proficiency (Lin, 2009).

Online learning, also known as *e-learning*, *virtual learning*, *computer-assisted learning*, *distance learning*, and *web-based learning*, potentially allows learning to take place away from the traditional face to-face-instruction. The learner uses technology to access learning material, communicate with the instructor and other learners, and gain academic support, hence making up for the shortage of teachers and learning materials characteristic of most developing countries of which Jordan is one, improving the quality of education and providing students with information and technology skills, not to mention motivating students and improving their performance (Olson, Codde, deMaagd, Tarkleson, Sinclair, Yook, & Egidio, 2011).

E-learning in Jordanian universities has been reported as problematic (Al-Shboul & Alsmadi, 2010). For example, some instructors are reported to lack basic e-learning skills and even more are reported to favor traditional teaching styles to more innovative technology-supported ones. Other obstacles pertain to Internet connectivity and cost (El-Seoud, Al-Khasawneh, & Awajan, 2007).

Easyclass is an online learning management system with some potential for the Jordanian EFL context. Through the use of Easyclass, instructors have full control over student participation since a student needs an access code to join the class from which he/she can also be removed by the instructor. Instructors can also add or delete content which may only be viewed by members of a particular class. According to its developers (Editorial Team, 2020), Easyclass is beneficial for students because the platform is user-friendly and easy to use. Not only can students access online resources stored in digital classes and learn from other students, but they can also learn independently and receive immediate feedback (Easyclass, 2016).

The literature is a bit controversial on the effectiveness of online learning in EFL instruction. Whereas some authors (Banditvilai, 2016; Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Dwaik, Jweiless, & Shrouf, 2016; Felix, 2001; Kuo, Chu, & Huang, 2015; Sumi & Takeuchi, 2008) suggest that online learning contributes significantly to EFL learners' proficiency and achievement in general and grammar in particular (Al-Jarf, 2005a; Levine, Ferenz, & Reves, 2000; Nagata, 1996), other research (Al-Jarf, 2005b; Alshwiah, 2009; Blake, Wilson, Cetto, & Pardo-Ballester, 2008) seems to suggest that online learning is markedly ineffective due to students' unfamiliarity with online instruction and lack of online interaction between students.

A thorough review of empirical research revealed a marked variation in tertiary-level EFL learners' attitudes towards online learning. Some research (Baniabdelrahman, Bataineh, & Bataineh, 2007; Dogoriti, Pange, & Anderson, 2014; Dwaik, Jweiless, & Shrouf, 2016; ahin-Kızıl, 2014; Sun, 2014) revealed positive effects for online learning on EFL learners' attitudes towards it. However, other research (Al-Jarf, 2005b; Alshwiah, 2009; Blake, Wilson, Cetto, & Pardo-Ballester, 2008) reported negative attitudes among EFL learners towards online learning (mainly because students do not favor online collaboration with other students and are unfamiliar with online instruction).

Even though similar research has been conducted on other LMSs (Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017) to the best of these researchers' knowledge, no research has been conducted on the effect of Easyclass on EFL learners' language proficiency in grammar at Jordanian universities, which may constitute a marked contribution of the study.

Problem, Purpose, and Questions of the Study

Through the researchers' collective experience as educational practitioners at both the general and tertiary education levels, they have noted a general weakness in English among their students. Furthermore, as technology has been found to facilitate learning among Jordanian and other EFL learners alike (Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017), this study attempts to examine the potential

effect of Easyclass, as an alternative to traditional instructional delivery, on grammar learning in the Jordanian EFL classroom.

Irbid National University (INU) was targeted in the research because the University does not avail its instructors and students with a proprietary learning management system (LMS) and, thus, does not utilize online learning in the EFL classroom. When approached by the researchers, INU instructors reported a need for a learning management system to supplement their in-class instruction. Easyclass was sought because it is freely available for use by both students and instructors in and outside the classroom.

To determine the potential effectiveness of an LMS in improving teaching and learning of grammar, these researchers designed an Easyclass-based program to supplement in-class instruction and to test its potential effectiveness in the students' perceived and actual grammar learning. More specifically, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. Are there any statistically significant differences in Jordanian EFL tertiary-level students' grammar performance, which can be attributed to the mode of instruction (traditional vs. Easyclass-supplemented instruction)?
2. What are the students' opinions about the effectiveness of Easyclass?

Design and Variables

To achieve the purpose of the research, a mixed quantitative and qualitative quasi-experimental design was used. It targets three variables; one independent (namely, Easyclass supplementation) and one dependent variable (namely, students' grammar learning as measured by the test). The participants' opinions about the effectiveness of Easyclass in developing their grammar were gleaned through the questionnaire and interview schedule.

Participants

The two sections of an English Skills course, a required service course for all INU students, in the first semester of the academic year 2016/2017 were purposefully drawn. With a simple coin toss, the sections were randomly divided into an experimental group ($n= 17$) and a control group ($n= 22$). Both groups received the same face-to-face instruction by the same instructor, but the experimental group accessed Easyclass at home as a supplement to face-to-face instruction. The students were from different fields of study since the targeted course is a compulsory course for all INU students.

Instruments

A grammar pre-/post-test and a questionnaire were designed by the researchers and an interview was adapted from Al-Jarf (2005a). The grammar pre-/post-test, designed per the content and outcomes of the course, consisted of three types of questions: multiple-choice, fill-in-the blank, and underline-and-correct-error. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: one which collected demographic information about the participants and their potential Easyclass access and another which sought their opinions about the effectiveness of Easyclass in developing their grammar.

The validity of the instruments was established by a jury of university professors whose recommendations were used to amend these instruments. Similarly, their reliability was established by piloting them on a group of 15 EFL university students who were excluded from the sample used for the study. The reliability coefficient amounted to 0.84, which is deemed appropriate for the purpose of the research.

Instructing the Groups

At the onset of the treatment, the pre-test was administered to check the equivalence of the groups. Both the control and experimental groups were taught by the original course instructor to ensure that they received the same in-class instruction.

For the experimental group, the content (covering the grammatical topics of the course book) was re-designed and uploaded as a course, making use of the *Quizzes*, *Discussions* and *Classwall* features of Easyclass. The participants were also able to key in their opinions, questions or comments through the *Comment* feature available under each posting which could be viewed by all members of the group.

The participants were given their first tutorial, which started with how to create an Easyclass account. Each student created his/her username and password-protected account and sent the researcher a request to join the course. After accepting the students' requests to join the course, a second tutorial was given to introduce Easyclass and to demonstrate how to access the learning material posted on *Classwall*, homework on *Discussions*, or auto-corrected multiple-choice quizzes on *Quizzes*, using a sample grammar file, quiz and homework. Students were shown how to download the grammar files, do the quizzes and benefit from the recurring immediate feedback, and post answers to homework.

The participants were instructed to view the material posted on Easyclass at the beginning of each week over the course of the treatment. Both the instructor and first researcher explained that this material was supplementary to the in-class grammar instruction. The participants engaged in these activities over the course of the treatment, after which they were post-tested. The questionnaire was also distributed to the experimental group of which five students were also interviewed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The First Research Question

To answer the first research question which sought to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in Jordanian EFL tertiary-level students' grammar performance, which can be attributed to the mode of instruction (traditional vs. Easyclass-supplemented instruction), the mean scores and standard deviations of the experimental and control groups on the grammar pre- and post-test were calculated, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of students' scores on the grammar pre-/post-test

Group	n	Pre-test		Post-test		Adjusted Mean	SE
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Control	22	4.00	3.35	6.09	4.15	5.73	0.87
Experimental	17	3.17	3.16	9.05	6.19	9.51	0.99

Table 1 shows an observed difference between the control group and experimental group students' scores on the pre- and post-tests, which signals gains in achievement for both groups but more so for the latter. An observed difference is also evident between the adjusted mean

scores of the two groups. To determine whether these differences are statistically significant (at $\alpha = 0.05$), One-Way Analysis of Co-Variance (ANCOVA) was used, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: ANCOVA of the students' scores on the post-test

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	f	Sig.	η^2
Way	134.49	1	134.49	8.13	0.007*	0.18
Error	595.43	36	16.54			
Corrected Total	1061.23	38				

*Significant at ($\alpha = 0.05$)

Table 2 shows a statistically significant difference in the students' scores on the post-test in favor of the experimental group ($F = 8.13$, $df = 38, 1$, $P = 0.007$). One possible factor for the Easyclass-supplementation group's superior performance may have been the participants' engagement as independent learners both at their individual convenience and pace. They had the chance to access Easyclass whenever and wherever they wanted using either smartphones or computers.

The superiority of Easyclass may have also been the result of the participants' enthusiasm for Easyclass-supplementation to in-class instruction. This enthusiasm was reflected in the participants' responses to the grammar forums and their keenness for synchronous and asynchronous communication with the first researcher to receive feedback.

Self-assessment, which the participants did with diligence and enthusiasm, was another catalyst for their improved grammar performance. They expressed their willingness to do the assessment more than once to improve their grammar, especially after working on the PowerPoint slides, which included learning material, YouTube videos, and hyperlinks to further resources, on the Classwall. These allowed the participants' the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge and to identify their areas of weakness, and remedy them through frequent practice. The participants' performance on the pre- and post-tests illustrated their progress. Many answered correctly those questions which they missed in the pre-test.

These findings are consistent with previous research (Al-Jarf, 2005a; Hsieh & Chang, 2013; Nagata, 1996; Plomteux, 2013; ahin-Kızıl, 2014) which emphasized the positive effect of online learning on EFL learners' grammar performance, but was inconsistent with other research (Al-Jarf, 2005b; Alshwiah, 2009; Blake *et al.*, 2008) which reported that online learning was not especially effective in EFL learning for students' unfamiliarity with online instruction and lack of online interaction between students.

The Second Research Question

To answer the second research question which sought the participants' opinions about the effectiveness of Easyclass in improving Jordanian EFL tertiary-level students' grammar performance, their responses to both the questionnaire and the interview were processed, as detailed below.

To begin with, the mean scores and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the questionnaire were calculated, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations of the students' opinions about Easyclass

No.	Rank	Item	Mean	SD	Value
1	1	I find Easyclass useful in improving English language proficiency.	2.86	0.35	Agree
2	1	Accessing Easyclass increases my awareness of the importance of technology in English learning and teaching.	2.86	0.35	Agree
3	1	Easyclass is especially successful if I have Internet connectivity at home.	2.86	0.51	Agree
4	4	Easyclass slides improve understanding grammar.	2.80	0.41	Agree
5	4	Self-assessment tests with immediate feedback on Easyclass improve reading comprehension ability.	2.80	0.41	Agree
6	6	Easyclass slides improve reading comprehension ability.	2.73	0.45	Agree
7	6	I access Easyclass only to follow my instructors' instructions.	2.73	0.45	Agree
8	8	Easyclass provides asynchronous and synchronous communication with my instructors.	2.66	0.61	Agree
9	8	I access Easyclass regularly to improve my English language proficiency.	2.66	0.48	Agree
10	8	Easyclass is effective because I have the expertise to use it successfully.	2.66	0.48	Agree
11	11	Self-assessment tests on Easyclass with immediate feedback improve my grammar.	2.60	0.50	Agree
12	12	Easyclass leads to neglecting important traditional learning resources (e.g., library books).	2.13	0.91	Undecided
13	13	I cannot access Easyclass regularly because my study load is heavy.	2.00	0.75	Undecided
14	14	Easyclass increases students' stress and anxiety.	1.53	0.83	Disagree
15	15	My lack of skill in the computer and Internet is a barrier to my use of Easyclass.	1.40	0.63	Disagree
Overall			2.48	0.18	Agree

Table 3 shows the mean scores, standard deviations and ranking of the participants' responses to the questionnaire. The data in Table 3 shows that students were in general agreement on the effectiveness of Easyclass-supplementation in improving their grammar performance with items 1, 2, and 3 (*I find Easyclass useful in improving English language proficiency; Accessing Easyclass increases my awareness of the importance of technology in English language learning and teaching; and Easyclass is especially successful if I have Internet connectivity at home*), topping the mean scores with 2.86. Table 3 also shows that the participants were undecided showed undecidedness in regard to two items (namely, items 12 and 13: *Easyclass leads to neglecting important traditional learning resources and My lack of skill in computer and internet is a barrier to my use of Easyclass*) and disagreement with another two items (namely, items 14 and 15: *Easyclass increases students' stress and anxiety and I cannot access Easyclass regularly because my study load is heavy*).

These results may be readily explained considering the demographic data collected through the first part of the questionnaire, as it showed that none of the respondents reported familiarity with either the computer or Easyclass. These demographics further show that the majority of the respondents (a little over 66%) reported intermediate general computer proficiency, intermediate to advanced Easyclass proficiency (a little over 86%), and no computer access either on campus or anywhere other than at home or on their smartphones (20% and 80%, respectively).

The findings revealed favorable students' opinion about Easyclass. They generally reported that Easyclass is not only useful for improving their English but also instrumental in raising their awareness of the utility of technology for language learning and teaching.

The results of this study are also in agreement with those of previous research (Al-Jarf, 2005a; Baniabdelrahman *et al.*, 2007; Dogoriti *et al.*, 2014; Sun, 2014) which reported favorable learners' attitudes towards technology. For example, these findings bear resemblance to those reported by Al-Jarf (2005a) who reported that students found online courses both useful and fun, as they foster their motivation, self-esteem, and rapport with both instructors and fellow-students, not to mention that they allow for more practice, instant feedback, and material review.

However, the current findings are inconsistent with those of other research (Al-Jarf, 2005b; Alshwiah, 2009; Blake *et al.*, 2008) which reported unfavorable EFL learners' attitudes towards online learning, mostly as a result of lack of collaboration and unfamiliarity with online instruction (which are both lacking among the current respondents).

Five students were also interviewed and their responses taped, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed and classified into the following themes:

1. **Students reported generally positive opinions about the utility of Easyclass in language learning.** The respondents unanimously reported preferring Easyclass-supplemented to traditional in-class instruction, as shown in the excerpt below:

I like Easyclass because it covers all the grammar topics in our course. The topics are simply well-explained and the feedback from the instructor is continuous [S1 (edited)].

The platform is easy to use and includes almost all the topics related to our course [S2 (edited)].

Having Easyclass supplement in-class instruction saves my time since I have a job. I am not able to attend all classes, but the learning material in Easyclass allows me to study the topics I miss [S4 (edited)].

I like the idea of having tests while I am at home [S5].

2. **Easyclass positively affected students' grammar performance.** The respondents reported that Easyclass-supplementation has made a difference in their language learning in general and grammar learning in particular, as shown in the following excerpts:

My achievement in English has improved since Easyclass is designed in an interesting way. The continuous weekly posting of tests has especially improved my English [S1 (edited)].

My English language has improved with frequent access, and having the instructions written in English has also had a positive effect on my language learning English [S2 (edited)].

3. **A positive relationship exists between the frequency of Easyclass access and language learning.** A respondent reported that Easyclass-supplementation has not made a difference in his learning because he engaged neither regularly nor actively in Easyclass activities, as shown in the following excerpt:

I could not feel the effect of Easyclass ... because I am not active enough in Easyclass and I do not access it regularly [S5 (edited)].

4. **The respondents expressed interest in signing up for similar courses in the future if they get the chance.** Students reported finding all parts of the online learning material very useful, but discussion, self-assessment and immediate feedback were reported as the main reasons for their enthusiasm for the course, as evident in the excerpts below:

I will be happy to register in a similar course because Easyclass has proven beneficial for improving my English [S1 (edited)].

It is an interesting experience especially the immediate feedback on quizzes [S2 (edited)].

Everything in Easyclass is useful especially self-assessment tests and discussions because I can have an immediate feedback. I also like the PowerPoint slides since they include explanation for what we have covered in lectures, and this is supported with so many web links and YouTube videos [S3 (edited)].

I like self-assessment tests because of the immediate feedback and the opportunity to review my answers and to view the correct answers after finishing the quiz [S4 (edited)].

I like the self-assessment tests since they help me do the real tests in the course [S5].

5. **The participants were somewhat active in Easyclass.** The participants completed all of the self-assessment tests but two of them did not post replies to the forums. Students also affirmed that they accessed Easyclass regularly. For example, a student [S1] reported that he spent from half-an-hour to one hour a day on Easyclass, another [S2] reported spending half-an-hour four times a week, a third student [S3] reported spending 15 minutes a week, and the other two students [S4 and S5] reported spending one hour twice a week on Easyclass.
6. **Students faced some difficulties using Easyclass.** The participants reported encountering some problems using Easyclass. For example, a student [S1] reported not being able to change answers to quiz questions once one is clicked (an inherent flaw in the system itself). Another student [S2] reported difficulties relating to Internet connectivity and speed whereas another student [S4] reported initially stumbling along with the new experience, which was alleviated by the tutorials, continuous instructions by the first researcher, and continuous access and practice.

These results are in line with the findings of previous research - albeit on other forms of technology in EFL- [Nagata (1996), Felix (2001), Al-Jarf (2005a), Alshwiah (2009), Sun (2014), ahin-Kızıl (2014), Dwaik *et al.* (2016) and Banditvillai (2016)]. Felix (2001) concluded that students were generally positively inclined to working with the web, with most preferring to use the web as an addition to face-to-face teaching. Furthermore, Al-Jarf (2005a) and ahin-Kızıl (2014) reported students' accounts that online learning promotes effective learning, valuable learning experience and instant feedback, which are all crucial for language learning.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the absence of a formal institution-adopted LMS, Easyclass may constitute a catalyst for language teaching contact with their instructors. The findings of the current research have shown advantages for Easyclass-supplementation over traditional instruction. For example, group discussion forums not only encourage students to engage in discussions but also allow them to view other students' input and, thus, promote further language learning.

The current research has also provided evidence for the utility of Easyclass-supplementation. The current findings potentially encourage instructors to break beyond the boundaries of traditional classroom instruction to make use of open-source online resources to supplement their face-to-face instruction.

As the current research is limited in sample and scope, more research is recommended to encompass larger student bodies and other language aspects across the primary, secondary, and tertiary education sectors in Jordan itself and beyond. The effect of use of other LMSs on grammar and on English skills is recommended for further research.

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