

УДК 811.111

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FUTURELEARN: ONLINE PLATFORM FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH

Abstract. The given paper is devoted to the analysis of the online platform FutureLearn as a new method of teaching and learning the English language. Both advantages and disadvantages are highlighted while using this platform to give clear instructions. The assessment under self-isolation conditions is studied, as well. Conclusions made are of the scientific interest for researchers, teachers and mentors who aim at developing online sessions, two-way feedback and assessment.

Key words: online platform, FutureLearn, teaching, assessment, feedback.

Doubtless, in the light of the recent lockdown and challenging conditions we were forced to move to the online learning, which led to searching other approaches for teaching students who are far away from you and feel great anxiety. We could control many aspects of the environment in the classroom, since we provide a safe, inclusive environment conducive to both learning and teaching. Once this is taken away, we are to support students in their own learning spaces, which are linked to physical learning environments, tools and devices, connectivity, personal support. To keep in mind all the given aspects to minimize students' stress level and encourage them for better learning is impossible.

Hence, the problem of introducing both effective and engaging teaching methods of the future is becoming more and more relevant.

Once the traditional learning has shifted to online one in the light of the recent Covid-19 lockdown, the question of effective assessment must be scrutinized in detail. Online distance education continues to grow at a fast pace, even outpacing the overall growth of U.S. higher education [1, p. 16]. As we live in a modern IT world, we are given innumerable opportunities to choose to develop definite skills online. However, not all of them could be used as a supplementary part of the online session. The problem here is how to define which ones to choose and use/reuse [2].

The goal of our paper is to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of the online platform called FutureLearn, proving itself as a sustainable future standart of teaching and learning since 2012. This platform provides different courses from the world`s leading universities and brands. Among theam are British Council, Johns Hopkins University, University of Michiganm King`s College, etc. FutureLearn uses design, technology and partnerships to create enjoyable, credible and flexible online courses as well as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that improve working lives. The interested person is likely to earn professional and academic accreditation, i. e. real-world skills with in-demand online courses led by renowned educators and academics from leading universities around the world.

The relevance of the research is obvious as each year the number of students using FutureLearn increases. More than 190 countries collaborate with this platform. The methodological framework of the paper is based on the comparative and analytical methods covering numerous aspects of learning on the FutureLearn platform.

Every course on the platform FutureLearn has been designed according to principles of effective learning, through:

- storytelling;
- discussion;
- community support to celebrate the course progress.

Principle 1. Storytelling

Each partner university has designed a complete learning experience, presented by leading academics in their field. Ideas are introduced via high quality videos and articles, that`s more interesting for learners comparing with quite long broadcast classroom lectures. Every course tells a whole story, step by step, with challenges and effective tips along the way, to test students` understanding. For teachers the platform is also useful to work on to feel how it feels to be a student again; while studying the platform you handle the exercises and questions which can be difficult for students, so you prepare the answers and further explanation in advance.

You can then all together discuss what you've learned, testing your new knowledge with interactive quizzes that offer helpful responses and the opportunity to try again if an answer is wrong. Every course tells a story, step by step, with challenges and helpful tips along the way, to test and build students' understanding.

Principle 2. Discussion

You, as a teacher, should keep in mind that not all students like being social, so rather than sending our learners offline to separate discussion forums, you can add your comments alongside the content and ask your students do the same. Even the shiest student is likely to leave a comment or write a question. We learn best when we share and debate ideas with fellow learners, to understand their different experiences and perspectives and to fill the gaps in our own knowledge. That's something axiomatic.

Following other learners is part of a powerful system that FutureLearn is building, since it will allow every user to acknowledge good contributions and promote people who offer helpful advice, and to develop own reputation, consequently. In this way, success comes not just from passing an assignment and completing a course, but also from making a contribution to the FutureLearn community.

Principle 3. Community support to celebrate the course progress

The user can start by reading what other people have already said about the topic, and then join in when he or she is ready leaving the comment. If students particularly like reading comments, you can them to choose to follow its author so that they can easily find the people and comments that are of the most interest to them. Further learners supporting and congratulating each other on this platform make friends on this platform. Learners can make immediate use of their newly acquired skills by sharing their knowledge with their peers. FutureLearn will be building on these concepts of 'discussion in context' and 'following' over the coming months, so that social learning feels more like a chat with friends about your ideas and what you've learned and less like a forced conversation when students' anxiety level is too high.

One effective way to enhance learning on the FutureLearn is to make the process visible, so that you know what is coming next, where you and your students are in the course and how far you have come. The so called To Do list gives you an overview of the course, showing the activities for each week, and keeping a record of what you've personally completed. The profile page provides a summary of your own activity, including your courses and any comments you have made.

Your learning page fall into:

- courses

The ones you are already in

- wishlist

The courses you would like to start

- recommendations

The list of courses that can be interesting for you

- achievements

The list of certificates showing your course progress

The students' pages are not visible for the teacher, so you are supposed to meet online to get the two-way feedback.

As far as the advantages of FutureLearn are concerned, we define the following:

- visually attractive and simple design;
- variety of courses to choose;
- possibility to get a certificate;
- learning on own pace (online and offline);
- community support.

The bright and simple design will attract students' attention. It's simple platform to use, as there are no distracters or advertisements. Learners can use this platform via mobile phone too. Doubtless, while going on bus or in a taxi it is much more convenient to log in and study the course. Mobile learning or M-learning is also a form of distance education, m-learners use mobile device educational technology at their convenient time [3].

The platform under consideration provides a great number of courses in different scientific fields from top universities and specialist organizations ranging from medicine to medieval Irish course. Each person will find something that interests him or her much. As far as the online courses duration is concerned, they fall into short, experttracks, microcredentials and even online degrees. It would be wise to mention that the opportunity to pass course tests for free (not all) and get certificates motivate users greatly. Own learning pace which is no doubt another advantage is important for each student in case unstable connection or no internet at home. Also, for students who work part-time, FutureLearn courses are of interest, consequently. The contents of the course can be useful since students prepare versatile projects in classroom and online.

Each course is divided into weeks and offers an introduction to the course video and sample tasks to fulfill. A person in the video is not an actor, he/she is a student who wants to start the course and asks questions that concern him/her. Students feel at ease while they see a mere person, not a specialist using in speech poetic words and phrases which are difficult to understand. Every learner after studying the video can ask something leaving a comment. Besides the video and sample tasks learners are welcome to join a common chat-room where they can ask questions and share experience. No doubt, this is one of the greatest and simplest options as learners easily and without hesitation speak with each other, make friends. For more serious matters each learner can write directly to the expert and discuss the problem face-to-face via online session. Experts are open to all questions, you just leave the comment.

One more advantage to highlight is the ability to transform your organization due to FutureLearn courses. In a fast-changing world skills gaps open up too quickly. To upskill or reskill large numbers of employees, ensuring everyone is up to date with new developments you can try the FutureLearn specific courses.

If you, as an employer need to introduce a new style of working or strategy with the platform under analysis you can easily immerse many employees in a subject. Teams can come together to collaborate and trade ideas on a private course, custom course or open course. You can support and encourage the personal and professional

development of your employees, enrolling them on specific courses, or courses of their choosing and monitor their progress with our Learning Manager tool.

As far as the disadvantages of learning on FutureLearn are concerned we are to distinguish the following:

- some courses need to be upgraded (paid);
- the lack of two-way feedback
- courses are aimed at already motivated students.

As was noted the range of courses need to be upgraded, i. e. they are not free. For a student this is supposed to be a demotivating barrier. Not upgraded courses after some times are not possible to use any more, so you lose your course progress and unable revise what was taught earlier.

Scrutinizing disadvantages, it is important to add one more, possibly the greatest one. FutureLearn online courses are aimed at motivated students in general, for those who are not interested in studying this platform will not benefit. Online learning and teaching on platforms still lack two-way feedback, since it is the most important goal to achieve for all teachers. Feedback and assessment are essentially interconnected and are to support active learning, with assessment leading to the constructive feedback. To consider one without the other seems to have no sense, respectively. Hence, the well-designed assessment and feedback loop allows learners to monitor their progress, and educators to teach responsively and support students to evaluate learning and set goals.

Here we are to adopt some reflective practices in the online space. Reflecting using a journal or a template might seem like going back to teacher training but reviewing and evaluating your online learning activities fix a plan to follow and use, even if it does not work perfectly. Another reflective opportunity deals with considering teaching and learning from a student`s perspective. The more you ask and discuss with your learners, the better results and feedback you get. Some polls devoted to defining the most challenging experience while learning online could help you to control the whole process regardless of time limitation.

Diana Laurillard, UCL, claims that just getting a few hours experience of what it is like to be a genuine student in this context is invaluable to you when you come to consider the question «what does it take to learn this?» for your own students [4]. Moreover, just simple questions to yourself after each online session could help you to define both the strong and weak sides.

As far as feedback is concerned, there are some key points to keep in mind. They will definitely support you while online teaching period.

First of all, clearly identify what you are feeding back on (sort the material you have already learned), when exactly feedback will occur (plan in advance), how it fits into your lesson, etc. In other words, make it rigorous, relevant, useful not time costly.

Secondly, involve your students into the feedback loop that will lead to their better responding to your guidance. You should manage their expectations, respectively. Students can be co-creators in what they are working on [5, p. 757]. By involving them, you definitely know what should be introduced, drilled or just ignored. To do this requires both time and structure to strike.

Thirdly, make feedback the essential part of your lessons and use it a learning opportunity. As a teacher you had better avoid giving grades which students glance at.

The given paper is of great interest to instructors, teachers aiming at getting frequent and continuous feedback from learners that is an essential part of effective teaching and learning process. To boost students` feedback and engagement under the challenging circumstances still remains a long-term goal. Thus, the online platform FutureLearn could be used as an effective supplementary part of teaching and learning English. Doubtless, FutureLearn offers you a powerful new way to learn online.

The forms of learning and teaching could be different ranging from projects, revisions, clear schedules, inductions to learning online, series of activities to maintain continuity from the students you work with.

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FUTURE LEARN: ОНЛАЙН-ПЛАТФОРМА ДЛЯ ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ И ИЗУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена изучению онлайн-платформы FutureLearn как нового метода обучения английскому языку. Нами были предоставлены чёткие инструкции по работе с анализируемой платформой, выделены преимущества и недостатки, также даны рекомендации по оцениванию работ учащихся в условиях самоизоляции. Выводы представляют научный интерес для исследователей, преподавателей и учителей, стремящихся повысить качество онлайн-занятий, процесса оценивания и обратной связи с учащимися.

Ключевые слова: онлайн-платформа, FutureLearn, обучение, оценивание, обратная связь.