Dynamic lesson planning in EFL reading classes through a new e-learning system

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Abstract. This paper illustrates how lesson plans, teaching styles and assessment can be dynamically adapted on a real-time basis during an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading classroom session by using a new e-learning system named iBELLEs (interactive Blended English Language Learning Enhancement system). iBELLEs plays a crucial role in filling the gaps between the teacher's expectations and students' needs. iBELLEs is used as a feasible tool to help teachers in upper-intermediate level Japanese EFL reading classes gauge students' comprehension of current reading materials, choose appropriate teaching styles and make dynamic assessments to pursue particular sub-goals before reaching the final goal of a given classroom session. iBELLEs is built on a database technology and is used as an electronic textbook equipped with a bidirectional communication facility in face-to-face EFL reading classrooms that are supported by a robust Language Management System (LMS) called WebOCMnext. By obtaining immediate feedback from the students, the teacher can determine an appropriate level of mediation that should be carefully, but quickly adjusted to satisfy individual student's needs. The current study tries to explore how simultaneous feedback from the students can help teachers make dynamic lesson planning and assessment during a single EFL reading classroom.

Keywords: EFL reading, e-learning system, dynamic assessment, immediate feedback.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Basic conception of the development of iBELLEs

The fundamental conception of the new e-learning system named iBELLEs is a flexible corpus annotation (Okada & Sakamoto, 2010) which is based on database management technology. The authors have been working on the development of a corpus annotation system that allows system users to design their own tagset and assign any tags as attributions to a given corpus. In corpus annotation, as pointed out in Sinclair (1991), to adopt a certain tagset would mean to accept it a priori and consequently reject other tagging framework. In iBELLEs, every part of a specific EFL reading comprehension passage can be assigned any attribution by its users, i.e. EFL teachers and their students. When using iBELLEs, teachers can 'highlight' particular parts of a given reading passage together with annotations (explanations or hints about the text); the students can also 'highlight' particular parts with three distinctive colours. Additionally, in the database, each constituent of a passage is assigned attributions that mean it is 'highlighted' or 'given annotation'. The teachers define and design their tagsets in the teaching materials making process, whereas the students select the type of the highlight following their teacher's instruction.

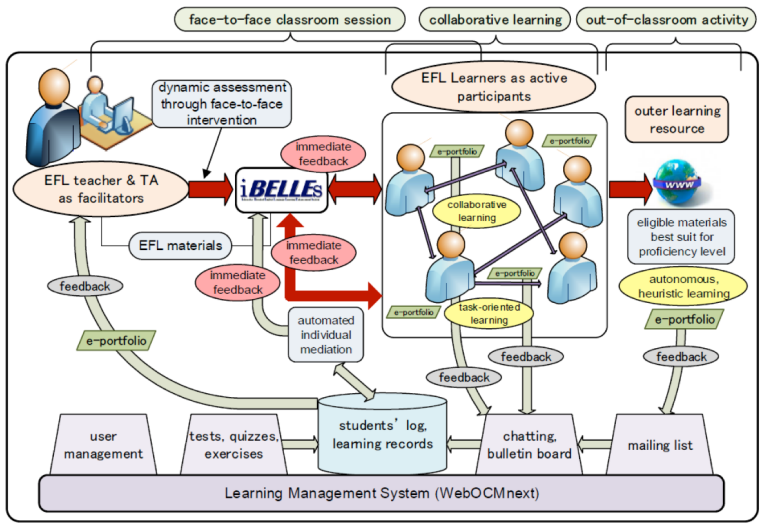
As Kissau and Algozzine (2015) point out, in some teaching situations the face-to-face (F2F) mode of instruction is more advantageous than its online counterpart. Based on an idea that these two modes should be blended and arranged in a complementary fashion, iBELLEs is designed to perform best in an F2F classroom in which EFL reading materials and comprehension questions are transmitted online. During an F2F classroom session, a teacher can observe what the students are doing, highlight a target passage and then mediate appropriately their learning activity by giving brief explanations or suggestions. To overcome a mismatch of teaching and learning styles, the teacher determines how to run a class and manage lesson plans and instructional time based on an immediate decision made by visual observation of the students' activity. In order to support the teacher's dynamic decision and management of the EFL reading lesson, it is indispensable for the new system to be equipped with the functionality to allow the teacher to grasp and gauge students' needs immediately and intuitively.

1.2. LMS and a new e-learning system

As can be seen in Figure 1, iBELLEs is developed and placed in an overall blended EFL reading e-learning program. The entire course is supported by a robust LMS named WebOCMnext that manages all activities of both the teacher and students

(Okada & Sakamoto, 2014). The teacher can (1) give quizzes and tests, (2) transmit reading materials, (3) receive different sorts of feedback utilizing e-portfolios or bulletin boards, (4) obtain immediate feedback and give appropriate mediation through iBELLEs and (5) dynamically alter the lesson plan in an actual F2F classroom. On the other hand, the students (1) interact with their teacher and teaching assistant on a real-time basis through iBELLEs, and (2) send their requests or messages on their learning difficulties through e-portfolios, chatting or bulletin boards and (3) are supported in their out-of-classroom (OOC) learning activities.

Figure 1. iBELLEs in an overall EFL e-learning program



Though iBELLEs is designed for maximum efficacy in the F2F instruction mode, it provides the EFL teacher with opportunities to select the most efficient lesson plans and instruction modes that can be adopted both inside and outside of the classroom. The different sorts of feedback come from not just F2F classroom sessions, but also OOC activities stored and managed by the LMS.

2. iBELLEs, a new e-learning system

2.1. Visual interaction to bridge the gaps between teacher and students

Through the sophisticated interface of iBELLEs, the teacher can observe what the students are actually doing, and can give appropriate instruction in an F2F mode.

Moreover, the teacher can dynamically alter the duration of any lesson prepared beforehand, such as vocabulary, grammar, discourse structure and reading strategy. In every lesson, the teacher can select the most appropriate instruction mode. In a vocabulary lesson, for example, when the teacher observes a wide divergence of vocabulary knowledge among the students, s/he alters the instruction mode from F2F to the individual learning mode; when the teacher notices that the students should work collaboratively on a common reading material to acquire deeper comprehension skills, s/he may change the instruction to the collaborative learning (CL) mode (Davies, 2015).

2.2. Teacher mode

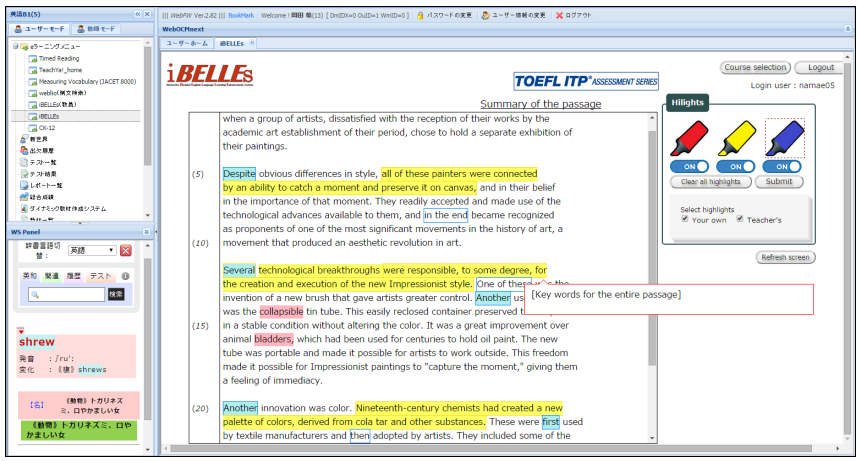
Figure 2 is a screen shot of iBELLEs in its teacher's mode running on the LMS platform. The teacher can instantly and visually grasp what the students are doing on the screen, where highlighted parts indicate their reading difficulties (in Figure 2 different colours show unknown words and half-familiar words of the entire class). Moreover, iBELLEs is equipped with a unique function of selecting different threshold numbers by which the teacher can intuitively observe the general inclination of the class. In addition, the teacher is able to select a particular group of students as well as an individual student by checking the name(s) on the list (the lower right corner). The teacher may intervene and stop individual learning activities and encourage the students to work in a collaborative manner or, conversely, instruct student groups to stop CL and get into individual learning style.

Figure 2. iBELLEs and LMS

2.3. Student mode

In this mode, each student is prompted to highlight specific parts of the target passage using three pens with distinctive colours. Figure 3 shows a particular student's screen where s/he highlights discourse markers in light blue and key sentences in yellow. At the same time, the student can see the highlighted parts by the teacher, which are displayed in coloured rectangles with corresponding colours. A red rectangle window for hints and explanations pops up when a student left clicks a given part of a passage.

Figure 3. Highlights by student and teacher



3. Conclusion and further potential uses

Through iBELLEs, the teacher can instantaneously grasp students' expectations and intervene in their learning activity with efficient individual mediation. Based on observations through immediate feedback, the teacher may adapt lesson plans or alter the duration of each lesson.

One of the most important features of iBELLEs' highlighting functionality is the definition of a given highlight: it is not decided in advance but defined by the teacher in the actual EFL reading instruction process. The teacher is required to design the highlight set that is most efficient for the current teaching material, and dynamically decide the teaching styles or lesson plans based on immediate feedback. The unlimited pedagogical potentials of iBELLEs, a handy electronic

textbook with bidirectional communication facilities, are an attractive topic for future research.

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