The Pearl Side of Online Portfolios: A Descriptive Study on the Rich Experience of Using Pearltrees by Master Students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT
Teaching English to ESL teachers is a challenging task for a number of reasons, the lack of connection between the target language and the native one being one of the most challenging factors (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2013). Therefore, teachers are supposed to be innovators in creating the tools that could boost the learning process, as well as eliminate the factors that may possibly inhibit it in any way. In the era of information technology, a variety of digital tools that a teacher can use for empowering students to learn languages have emerged. PearlTrees is one of these tools; allowing sharing information fast and communicating efficiently, the specified site can be viewed as a perfect tool for enhancing ESL teachers' skills through shared knowledge, peer assessment (Daniels, 2002), scaffolding (Combs, 2004) and support from the teacher, and active participation.

INTRODUCTION
The idea of using innovative technology as the tools for improving teachers' and their learners' skills is not new (Kwok, 2015); in fact, innovative tools are used actively by teachers and students alike to perfect their skills and acquire new knowledge (Zanón, Monje, & Romero, 2012). However, the adoption of new tools is fraught with major consequences unless the properties of these IT instruments are studied well and their effects are commonly known (Quinlivan, 2012). Herein the necessity to test newly adopted approaches and make sure that they are not going to backfire in any way lies.

Particularly, the idea of incorporating a tool for sharing data online for teachers in the UAE deserves to be viewed as a decent method for enhancing knowledge and skills acquisition among teachers and students alike (Bailey & Damerow, 2014). providing strong grounds for training the newly acquired skills, as well as carrying out per assessments of the tools created for improving the learning process, the specified tool can be viewed as a major foot forward in managing the process of data management and tracing the progress of students.

The tool in question opens a plethora of opportunities for data sharing. The latter, in its turn, presupposes impressive progress in the communication process among the teachers, as well as between the teachers and their students. Consequently, scaffolding of the latter can be promoted with the help of the specified tool, whereas teachers will be capable of reviewing each others' work and provide ideas for further improvements.

THE STUDY
The importance of using information technology in general and online tools, in particular, has been discussed extensively, yet few studies outline the actual reasons for the tools in question to assist students in the process of knowledge acquisition, especially when it concerns general things, such as knowledge sharing, information acquisition, and skills training (Haneda & Nespor, 2012). The PearlTrees site, in its turn, is assumed to provide students with the means of not merely training their skills in data analysis information retrieval and defining instructions for further research but also share information so that all those concerned could acquire the specified skills in a manner as fast and expeditious as possible.

To locate the effects, which the use of the specified site has had on learners, a study has been designed. Involving active use of the opportunities that the site in question has to offer, the research helps understand whether the tools provided to the students are used actively and how important the application of the specified tool is going to be fur the students' further academic progress. Seeing that the site in question provides implicit knowledge and informs the learners on how to arrange and analyze data, it can be assumed that PearlTrees can be used as the means for students and their teachers to enhance the learning process and encourage self-directed learning (Hsin & Wu, 2011) and metacognition (Kim & Cha, 2015) by sharing data, carrying gout peer assessments (Sardareh, Saad, Othman, & Me, 2014) and using scaffolding techniques (Cumming-Potvin, 2007) to train the required skills.

The key research questions, which the specified study seeks to answer, therefore, are as follows:

1. In what way does PearlTrees enhance students' English teaching skills, and how does the specified tool empowers students to apply these skills to real-life problems concerning learning English?
2. What ESL skills does the creation of E-Portfolio at PearlTrees help students to train?
3. Does the process of sharing documents, which PearlTree allows for, create premises for the development of shared knowledge principles along with peer evaluation and scaffolding?
4. To what extent does the use of PearlTree improve ESL Master degree students' performance?
5. Does the use of PearlStudy contributes to improving the education process for Saudi Arabia students, and, if it does, in what way?
6. How does the creation of E-Portfolio helps Saudi Arabian ESL teachers improve their skills?

The research design can be defined as mixed, as predominantly qualitative relations between the key variables are discussed, yet there is a need to quantify the research results so that the findings could instruct the teacher on choosing the further tools for enhancing students' performance. A survey was used as the key tool for data collection, whereas taxonomy and the method of linear regression (Seber & Lee, 2012) were adopted as the foundation for its analysis.

The survey in question consists of three open-ended questions. Particularly, the respondents were presented with three questions regarding the efficacy of the E-Portfolio as a tool. The type of questions was chosen based on the high level of veracity that it provided (Reid & Scott, 2012) as opposed to multiple-choice questions or Likert-type ones (Shuyan, 2012), which provide the research participants with a limited amount of options for an answer. Specifically, the respondents were to clarify whether they liked the very concept of E-Portfolio, whether they thought that using it was a good idea, and how the specified tool could be used in the setting of UAE schools for ESL teachers. The surveys were collected from six students, who were also supposed to submit an E-Portfolio created and shared with the help of the specified site. All the participants involved signed consent forms and, therefore, were fully aware of the fact that the information supplied by them would be used for research. Therefore, the study was carried out according to the existing ethical standards.

FINDINGS
The students' responses show that most of the learners appreciate the opportunities for data management, which PearlTrees provides for its users. Particularly, the opportunity to upload basically any type of data and share it instantly with peers has been identified as the key advantage that the site has to offer. the issue regarding communication options can be viewed as the second most important aspect of the tool under analysis; according to the outcomes of the study, 82% of the respondents agreed that the subject matter is crucial for exchanging information and important works.

Table 1. Typology of the Students' Responses

INFORMATION	CODE	RESPONDENT(S)	%
Data related to the organization and presentation of the information; possible issues concerning safety of the participants' data	Information management; information security	A, E, F	33.3
Using computer and the Internet	Information management and IT-related skills	A, B, D	33.3
Self-evaluation, renovation of continuous revisions	Self-directed learning and metacognition	A, E, F	33.3
In cases of poor Internet connection, E-Portfolio will be unavailable.	Availability	B	16,7
Communication between instructors and the students	Communication	A, C, D, E, F	83.3
E-Portfolio does not cost much; it's relatively cheap	Cost efficacy	A, B, C, E, F	83.3
An advantage for the instructor him-/herself	Teaching strategies	A, C, E, F	66.7
Pitching the idea of using E-Portfolios to the UAE education authorities;	Positive outcome for UAE learners	A, F	33.3
Technology issues may impede the process of intrdocuing UAE learners to PearlTree	Problems for UAE lschools	C	16.7

Unfortunately, significant similarities have also been located in the learners' analysis of the problems that the site may have. Particularly, the lack of security has been touched upon several times (66.7%). According to the chart provided above, most of the study participants feel that, due to the lack of proper security, their personal data may be endangered and, therefore, their safety may be jeopardized.

According to the table provided above, the site can also be deemed as efficient for enhancing futher learning due to the options regarding the IT-related skills and time management, which it provides to learners. 2 students (36.7%) indicated that other students with less advanced IT skills may experience tangible difficulties in adjusting to the new learning environment and managing information, including its acquisition, processing and transfer.

Therefore, the IT issue may return several major problems. According to the research data, a concern about possible issues with acquiring the corresponding IT skills timely and efficiently has been raised. Therefore, some of the students, who are not proficient in using computers and the Internet, may feel insecure about their progress, which will inevitably lead to a drop in the quality of their performance (Shalin, 2013).

Moreover, the cost for advanced setting, which is available to paid subscribers, has clearly raised a few eyebrows. As the study shows, three out of six participants (50%) were concerned about the lack of cost efficacy for the students, who use the specified tool on a regular basis. Despite the fact that one of the research participants (16.7%) indicated that the approach in question can be viewed rather flexible in terms of its financial strategy and the financial opportunities, which it offers to its visitors, the issue still clearly needs further solution. A more detailed analysis of the issue in question, however, will show that the students are clearly eager to use the new site as the tool for their further academic accomplishments (Rad & Vali, 2012).

The technical issues, which students may face in case of using the approach mentioned above, also deserve to be brought up (Wiske & Breit, 2013). One of the respondents brought up that the above-mentioned tool will be unavailable to the students, who experience problems with DNS connection, connection speed or power cuts in their area. Although the issue as brought up by only one of the respondents (16.7%), it still deserves to be heard as a valid statement. However, seeing that only one student has actually brought this point up, it can be assumed that technical issues are not the priority for the students at present and that, from the technological perspective, the specified tool can be deemed as perfect for learners of English.

The table offered above also shows that the communication issue has been listed among the numerous advantages of PearlTrees. Indeed, 5 people out of 6 (83.3%) think that PearlTree is a perfect means of communicating with the tutor and receiving feedback on the projects completed via the designated tool. On the one hand, the site does not offer much in terms of communication, with no outstanding options and merely a set of basic tools. On the other hand, the communication process, which occurs between the teacher and the student, allows pinpointing the actual problems that a student has and, therefore, working on them correspondingly. the fact that the site does not involve a direct conversation and does not incorporate nonverbal elements thereof, the instructions, which students receive, are clear and concise. As a result, the learners are provided with the means of improving their performance, which most of the respondents clearly appreciate.

Moreover, some of the respondents (16.5%, i.e., 2 out of 6) have mentioned the problems associated with the need to introduce the specified approach to the UAE schools. Particularly, the technical issues such is the need to install the corresponding equipment, create accounts for numerous teachers to log in to the site, etc., have been mentioned as the major impediments to the promotion of the technique under analysis in the target area.

Nevertheless, a range of respondents (5 out of 6) have made it clear that the UAE schools are going to benefit from the specified application At this point, one must mention that the benefits such as the opportunity to save time and money was mentioned as the essential positive characteristics of the PearlTrees site (83.3%). In addition, most of the participants of the study claimed that the adoption of the tool in question will help them arrange their work and improve the quality of teaching considerably, allowing for a consistently high-quality learning process (100%).

$$y = 10,954x + 8,86$$
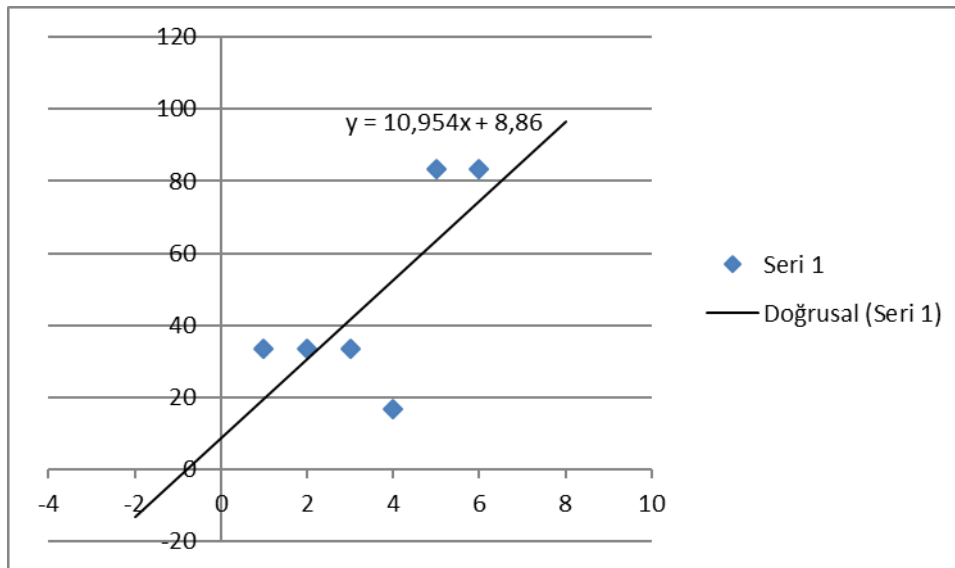
Chart 1. Students' Attitude Towards the Use of PearlTree in UAE Schools

The trend line shows quite clearly that there is a strong tendency among the students interviewed for the study to accept the PearlTrees tool as an important means of communicating with each other and the class. In other words, it is expected that increasingly more students are going to accept the specified tool as a means of improving their teaching skills. Since PearlTrees offers a plethora of options for the specified purposes, the trend can be considered positive. However, a significant improvement of the security rates for PearlTrees is required (Phillips & Siangina, 2013).

As the outcomes of the study show, most research participants agree that the tool in question is very useful in analyzing information and sorting it according to specific parameters. The chart provided above shows very clearly that the students' responses to the questionnaire tend to be rather positive. Despite the fact that most of the participants have doubts concerning the plausibility of introducing the UAE schools to the above-mentioned approach, they still display a positive tendency in accepting the benefits that the program has to offer.

CONCLUSIONS
The analysis has shown that the PearlTrees site enhances the students' English learning skills by creating a platform for them to share their knowledge and information with each other. Additionally, the survey has shown that the learners are most likely to benefit from the use of the specified site along with teachers. Even though the use of the site may not impact them directly, they will be able to receive support from their teachers, as well as from each other, not to mention the fact that they will be able to acquire new skills in information management. Finally. the use of peer assessment will become possible for not only the students, who practice teaching but also their learners, needs to be brought up. Consequently, a significant progress is expected in the overall performance of the learners in the course of lessons (Falchikov, 2013).

Therefore, the answers to the key research questions revolve primarily around the concept of communication, information processing and the ability to access the fellow teachers and the students involved instantly. The major problem, which teachers are likely to face when dealing with the site in question, in their turn, may consider possible hiccups in the Internet connection, possible power cuts and other problems related to the proper functioning of technology. Seeing that the use of the site requires a consistent connection to the Internet and cannot occur offline, it is highly desirable that proper preventive measures should be taken for teachers to have a constant access to PearlTrees in any scenario.

As far as the second question is concerned, the study also indicates that the use of the specified site contributes to the development of the ESL teaching skills such as scaffolding because of the need to communicate in short messages predominantly, instructors will have to provide students with as much support as they can so that the premises for efficient learning could be created.
Herein the answer to the third question lies. Improving both teachers' and students' skills in information management, the site enhances the concept of data sharing. In other words, the every design of the site invites teachers and students to share information.

Thus, PearlTrees increases the rates of students' teaching performance significantly. The char provided above shows clearly that most respondents have experienced a great surge in their enthusiasm for teaching, as well as discovered new strategies as far as teaching English is concerned. In addition, the Master students' performance is improved greatly by introducing the principle of accuracy and order into their work. As the survey results have shown, 3 out of 6 students (50%) mentioned that the tool in question helped them become more organized.

Teaching ESL learners the basics of English is not easy, especially for Master students. With little to no experience in arranging their work, managing their time, finding unique approaches to students in a diverse classroom, etc.. they need support drastically, PearlTrees, in their turn, provide this support and introduce students to the concept of self-directed learning along with efficient data management.

Herein the significance of creating the E-Portfolio lies; students understand what they will have to contribute as teachers and what standards they will have to meet. particularly, they receive further instructions on managing the teaching process and creating their unique teaching strategies, which will promote learning among ES: students and at the same time help the teachers improve their skills considerably.

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