

LFS AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL TO TEACHING: DIU EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: *In recent times a tremendous emphasis has been laid worldwide on the use of technology in teaching. As far as teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) is concerned, a good number of teaching methods based on information technology have emerged, e.g. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT). Learning Feedback System (LFS), alternatively called Social Web, has been developed by Daffodil International University in order to increase interaction between teachers and students of all courses through the use of technology. The interaction is mostly off-campus and may be round the clock. In LFS the teachers assign various tasks, which the students complete as per instruction. This LFS has added a new dimension in the mode of interactive teaching and has proved useful to the teachers who are using it to improve students' reading and writing skills in terms of composition, grammar, vocabulary and spelling. This paper attempts to explore various aspects of LFS focusing on its operation and benefits and the extent of its effectiveness in developing students' writing and reading skills. A survey, which has been conducted among the teachers and students on the usefulness of LFS, reveals that majority of students and teachers like the system and find it useful as far as students' reading and creative writing abilities are concerned. And, the benefits of LFS will outweigh its limitations if the recommendations prescribed in the study are followed for the betterment of the teachers and students, and overall the teaching-learning system.*

Keywords: *Learning Feedback System, English language teaching, computer assisted language learning, network-based language teaching, open source software, learning pyramid.*

Introduction

In an era of computers and internet, it is expected that the teachers of English would avail themselves of the opportunity of technology. In response to the pressure of incorporating information technology in the English Language

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Teaching (ELT) program, various computer-based methodologies have been developed, e.g. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT). (Smith & Baber 2005; Warschauer & Kern 2000; Chapelle 2000; Dudeney 2000; Levy 1997) In fact, there are immense opportunities of using technology in ELT. It is possible to devise innovative methods to make language teaching effective and interesting. A teaching method may be facilitated by various technological tools. One such tool is Learning Feedback System (LFS). It has been recently introduced in Daffodil International University as an ancillary to any course teaching. But we have found the tool very effective in ELT. At present, English teachers of the university are using the tool alongside their regular classroom activities. As it is rather new, literature on LFS is scarcely found. Therefore, we had to go for field study. We have keenly observed the activities in LFS and conducted a survey among the users of the system. The following sections focus on the theoretical and practical aspects of LFS.

Methodological and Terminological Explication

When we are dealing with methodology, we must be clear about some technical terms related to foreign or second language teaching. In the first place, we have to distinguish between method, approach, design and procedure, and their relationship with what we call 'tool'. For us, the term *tool* is much more relevant than others. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), *method* is an umbrella term and it subsumes three aspects of language teaching – approach, design and procedure. *Approach* refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serves as the source of practices and principles in language teaching. *Design* refers to the general and specific objectives of the method, syllabus and the specification of the roles of teachers and students. *Procedure* refers to classroom techniques, practices and behaviors observed when the design is implemented. By *tool* we mean the process by means of which teaching and learning is carried out. Therefore if we use computer for teaching and learning, it will be considered as a tool. For our case, LFS is not a method of teaching, but only a tool subsumed in technique. It is a technological tool to be used by the teachers and students to reach their goals stated in syllabus. It functions on the procedure level, as per the definition of Richards and Rodgers. It is a tool which makes the learning and teaching easier and more fruitful.

How LFS Evolved

The main drive for the emergence of LFS was the pressing need to use information technology in a better and greater way. Daffodil International University has always emphasized the use of computers and internet in its administrative as well as academic activities. For example, the university uses special software called 'Virtual University' to perform almost all its academic and administrative functions including accounts and examination related affairs. Its library is automated and it is powered by *coha* and other software. The classrooms have projectors, and very recently interactive electronic boards are being used in a few classrooms. There are computer laboratories for the students. And there is also an English Language Laboratory, which facilitates English language teaching and learning. Every teacher is provided with a computer with internet connection. There are also Wifi zones on some floors. Every teacher has an email ID in the university domain. Emails and websites are being used by the individual teachers in their own ways. Forum has been introduced for informal/semi-formal interaction between teachers and students. The authorities felt the need to formalize these interactions. The result is Learning Feedback System (LFS). The idea first struck the mind of Dr. Yusuf M. Islam, a Professor of Computer and Engineering in DIU, who was supervising a project of a group of students in 2010 Summer Semester. The students developed the system by exploiting an Open Source Software named ELGG. It was presented in the gathering of DIU faculty members, who provided suggestions to improve it. Following their suggestions, some facilities pertaining to education were added and it was developed as interactive educational software. It was ready for teachers' use in 2011 Spring Semester. In this system the teacher of a course and students interact with one another throughout the semester. The teacher plays the role of a supervisor and controller.

How LFS Works

A teacher of any course first registers himself/herself with the LFS, usually at the beginning of the semester. Then he/she invites the students to join the courses. The course teacher creates discussion topics and the students start interaction. The users may upload assignment, power point slides, class notes, lecture notes, course contents, and other text files for the use of others registered. The teacher may award marks for students' performance. Also, students can chat with their fellow classmates and teachers specifically on academic issues and discuss the matters instantly to get their problems solved or to comprehend them lucidly.

Micro-skills of Language Covered by LFS

LFS can cover several micro-skills of language, particularly grammar, vocabulary, spelling and composition. It also fosters peer correction and cumulative development. When writing on LFS in response to different tasks, students have to construct their own sentences. Initially they may make mistake in grammar but other students or the teacher may correct them, so their knowledge of sentence construction will improve. The students learn new words while reading and writing posts in LFS. Thus their vocabulary is enriched. Their spelling will also be improved as they may correct them by spell-checkers, or get them corrected by peers and teacher. The students will know how to compose a larger piece of text, for example, a paragraph or essay. In case of paragraph, the teacher may provide the topic sentence and students will write other sentences in support or elaboration of it. In case of essay, the teacher may provide the thesis statement and the students may develop it by writing relevant paragraphs. There are other ways of collaborative contributions. A student can start a task with a sentence and the other students can write the subsequent sentences until it is complete. The teacher can monitor the development and suggest way-out if it is stuck up anyway. Therefore, LFS can function as an excellent tool to increase the proficiency level of students in the areas of grammar, vocabulary, spelling and composition via collaboration between peers under the guidance of the instructor. The development will be cumulative and the students will witness the gradual building of larger texts from the bits of contributions put in by the LFS mates.

Benefits of LFS

The use of LFS offers a good number of benefits for students, teachers and administrators. Some of the benefits are as follows:

Firstly, one can participate in LFS task from anywhere and anytime. The students may spend as much time on the tasks as they need. They enjoy the benefits of distance learning through this as they can work staying at home.

Secondly, teachers may engage students in group activities through LFS. This will enhance students' collaborate power, helping them understand how to learn from others as well as help others to learn.

Thirdly, LFS makes learners technologically sound. Students get used to working with computer and internet and thus they make themselves fit for the employments in today's world.

Fourthly, LFS integrates subject knowledge and language proficiency. So it takes the mode of ESP (English for Specific Purpose). It serves the dual purpose of individual subject and English language.

Fifthly, LFS does not require any use of paper. Therefore it is environment-friendly. It saves paper and thus saves felling of trees. No use of paper also means cost minimization of education.

Sixthly, students enjoy a lot of autonomy in this system. There are no classroom stringencies and hence the students can work on the tasks as they like. They can apply their own sense of judgment. Teachers can also reduce his/her workload, by making the students independent learners.

Instances of Improvement

There are many instances of student's performance improvement through LFS. Two examples of how teachers used LFS for the benefits of students are cited below. We can take them as the cases of ESP, which addresses subject knowledge as well as English:

1. One business teacher wished to give a quiz on writing a job description. However, he realized that students will simply copy from the book and will not be independently able to write job descriptions. He decided to use the LFS to help the students develop fluency so that they would be confident in writing independently in the quiz. So in the blog for his course he gave a job description that was not in the book. He motivated his students to visit and complete this task. The first student who visited the blog wrote one line in poor English. The second student read this line and added two lines to the job description. By the time, the 10th student visited the blog, one whole page of writing was done. The 11th student reformatted everything and gave it a final shape. In the quiz itself, the students did much better and did not feel the urge to copy. (Islam, 2011)
2. The first semester students of one science faculty teacher performed poorly in the midterm exam. When the teacher asked why, they had many excuses, such as, did not understand the English of the question, did not know how to express oneself, etc. So the teacher decided to use LFS to find out the problems and also get the students to help themselves learn. The teacher then gave an assignment with marks in LFS. He asked the students to make two posts. The first post was two problems they faced during the Midterm Exam. The second post was that they would read all

the problems and identify two specific problems regarding which they could help out their classmates. The result was miraculous in terms of writing. For their own problems, the students wrote two short sentences, on an average 10 words. However, when they tried to help others understand the average post was about 100 words. When others could not understand their English, they made a second improved post in a willingness to help their classmates understand better. All of the posts were spontaneous without students copying each other or copying from the Internet. The final effect was that the first semester students did much better in the final exam.

If students continue to write like this in all their four years at the university, by the time they graduate, they hopefully would be much more fluent in their subject and their English expression ability. (Islam, 2011)

Managing students in LFS

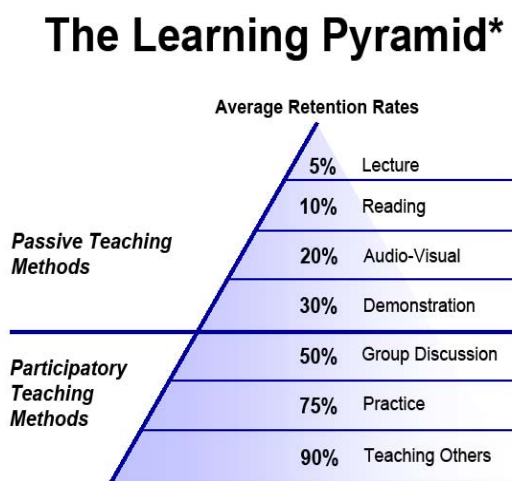
It is important to manage students in LFS properly to ensure optimum benefit from it. Teachers have to find ways to motivate their students to visit the course blog on a regular basis as the students often show reluctance in participating in LFS activities. Here are some ways to do it:

1. The teacher may assign marks for student's posting. The marks may be transferred from assignment or quiz sectors.
2. At the onset the teacher will give a clear idea of the benefits the students are going to derive from using LFS.
3. The teacher will create an LFS task, which is interesting to students and best suit their competence level.
4. The teacher will regularly monitor students' participation and provide necessary feedback and correction promptly.
5. The teachers may also create an environment of competitiveness among the students and appreciate them for their attempts and successes. Special awards may be allocated for the best performers.

It is true that in addition to teaching in the classroom, teachers may find it a little burdensome to use LFS regularly for managing students. But if it is enjoyable it is no more be felt as a burden. If the teacher takes this extra pain for the sake of his/her duty, he/she would be happy to see his/her students' improvement at the end of the day.

Survey on LFS

The biggest challenge of a teacher is to get a student to take ownership of the learning materials and engage in learning the subject. To help understand how students learn, many researches have been conducted worldwide. Researchers of National Training laboratories, Bethel, Maine showed in "Learning Pyramid on Average Retention Rate" that a student only retains 5% of what has been said in a lecture, whereas if a teacher can get a student to teach his peers, he/she retains 90%. Also, 50% learning takes place in group discussion. It is shown in the following diagram:



*Adapted from National Training Laboratories. Bethel, Maine

Innovative ways are required for boosting students' learning both in and outside classroom with the support of technology. The Learning Feedback System (LFS) can be used as a tool to facilitate students' learning as well as to find out what they have learned in the class. In LFS they can also share problems if they do not understand any topic or lesson. They can support each other and reach collective solutions. LFS can accelerate collective learning which ensures ownership of learning. If students continue to participate in LFS in their four academic years at university, they can achieve the best out of their courses by the time they graduate.

A survey was held among the teachers and students on how they feel about LFS. Fifty teachers and 100 students took part in it. The results show teachers

and students liked the system in varying degrees. Of the teachers, 58% liked it very much, 42% liked it moderately, and no teacher disliked it. Of the students, 68% liked it very much, 22% liked it moderately, and 10% disliked it.

Respondents	Number of participants	Liked very much	Liked moderately	Disliked
Teachers	50	29 (58%)	21(42%)	00 (0%)
Students	100	68 (68%)	22 (22%)	10 (10%)

Furthermore, seventy seven percent (77%) students thought LFS to be useful while 23% thought it to be unnecessary. Eighty four percent (84%) teachers were of the opinion that the system is useful for student's learning while the rest of the respondents didn't answer to the question given. The result is summarized in the following table:

Respondents	Number of participants	Thought useful	Thought unnecessary
Teachers	50	42 (84%)	00
Students	100	77 (77%)	23 (23%)

As far as developing students' writing and reading skills are concerned, 64% students agreed that they could improve their reading and creative writing abilities themselves by using LFS while 36% didn't think that their abilities had been improved. The result is summarized in the following table:

Respondents	Number of participants	Writing and reading skill improved	Writing and reading skills not improved
Students	100	64 (64%)	36 (36%)

However, when asked to what extent the students could develop their reading and creative writing skills, only nine students (9%) thought they could improve their skills outstandingly, twenty three (23%) good, thirty six (36%) moderate while thirty two students (32%) percent students thought that they could not improve their reading and writing skills. The result is summarized in the following table:

Respondents	Number of participants	Outstanding	Good	Moderate	Not Good
Students	100	9 (9%)	23 (23%)	36 (36%)	32 (32%)

Through LFS, teachers can easily find out what the students have learnt in class or what they have not. The system allows the students to think, write, share and discuss. One of the authors started an academic discussion in LFS posing a question to all students of a particular course. The first student didn't know how to start writing the answer or what to answer. Instead, he wrote 'image' as he could not upload his picture. Later, after taking help from the teacher and fellow students, he succeeded in carrying the discussion on and concluded resulting in a great informative academic discussion on that course.

In the course 'English-II (ENG-102), the author also took a diagnostic writing and reading test of 40 students of his class. Then he inspired them to participate in LFS giving them home task in every class. All students were supposed to write their home tasks on regular basis. At the end of the semester, the author found out that six (6) of the total students attended the course improved their writing and reading skills tremendously while another fourteen (14) students could improve the skills moderately. Twelve (12) students could not improve themselves remarkably and the rest were not motivated to participate or improve.

Reading and writing ability improved	Number of participants	Excellent	Moderate	Not good	Didn't participate
Students	40	6 (15%)	14 (35%)	12 (30%)	08(20%)

Problems and Barriers

At present DIU has 1012 courses registered with the LFS and some 72 teachers and 9,833 students are involved with them. For LFS, at present teachers do not follow any uniform rule to reward students with marks. Usually the awarded marks range over 0-5. This low marks allocation appears to be a major hindrance to its widespread and effective use. If the university comes forward to formulate a rule to allocate higher chunks of marks, at least 5-10, both the teachers and students will be more interested in using it. The survey also reflects the authors' observation. The mean of the teacher-awarded marks for LFS use is 2.95 and the mean of the student-demanded marks for LFS is 5.8.

From the survey conducted, the authors took feedback from the students and the teachers of DIU and identified some barriers to implementing LFS as a tool to teaching and learning. They are as follows:

- a. *Lack of Awareness:* Generally there is still a lack of awareness amongst the students of the effectiveness of learning through LFS. Many of them feel the existing learning method is good as they are used to traditional learning. Some students do not enjoy learning by LFS without pressure which may have negative impact on effective learning.
- b. *Bandwidth Issue and Connectivity:* Due to bandwidth and connectivity limitations, students find downloading of LFS contents to be slow, which causes frustration and boredom among them and eventually affects the ease of learning.
- c. *Computer Literacy and Digital Divide:* In Bangladesh, there is a large segment of the population that is computer illiterate or half-literate. This hinders the introduction and implementation of LFS. When students start their university life, they often do not have sufficient computer knowledge.
- d. *Difficulty in Engaging Learners Online:* Engaging learners actively is one of the key factors in determining the success of LFS, which requires a very high degree of self-motivation. Students find it difficult to migrate from the traditional learning mode to the new LFS.
- e. *Language Barriers:* The extensive use of English in LFS contents is also one of the factors that have hindered the success of LFS, especially in non-English speaking countries like Bangladesh. Many students are deterred from doing so since they are not confident in the use of English.
- f. *Lack of Attractive Features:* Students do not get entertained from LFS as they get more attractive features from internet, viz, facebook. Many students suggest introducing user-friendly chatting option, and uploading video clip into LFS.

There are other problems with the use of LFS at its present state. The relationship of LFS and course curriculum of different departments are not well defined. It is yet to be incorporated in the existing syllabuses in a coherent way. It is an additional duty of the teachers to use LFS apart from their regular classes. If they cannot give sufficient time, it will be of little use.

The application of LFS is still very limited. It is just a technical help for the teachers and students. It is no alternative to physical classroom. But LFS can

be made 'virtual classroom' with more added facilities and administrative supports. With its broader use, not only the teaching and learning will be better, but the university will go a step forward to become a real 'digital university', ultimately contributing to the materialization of the dream of 'Digital Bangladesh'. In fact, the wider use of technology can help Bangladesh to bring about a positive reform in its educational sector, keeping pace with the advancing world (Barman 2007).

Suggestions

From the survey, the following suggestions are put forward for the better use of LFS so that it becomes beneficial both for teachers and students:

1. *LFS Incorporation in Curricula*: LFS should be incorporated in the existing curricula of different programs of DIU. Rules should be formulated on how to use it by the teachers.
2. *Allocation of Higher Marks*: Higher marks, preferably from 5-15, should be allocated for the students' participation in LFS activities. It will act a point of motivation for students.
3. *Adding Attractive Features*: More visual and interactive features should be added to make LFS attractive both to teachers and students.
4. *Hands-on Training for Students*: To ensure best participation and performance, hands-on training may be provided to the students on how to use LFS. They will also be given a clear idea of its importance.
5. *Involvement of part-time faculty*: At present, part-time teachers do not normally use LFS. The authorities may encourage them to use it, if necessary, with the formulation of rules.
6. *Expansion of Wifi Area*: Area of Wifi should be expanded in the university so that students can access LFS from any part of the campus.
7. *Monitoring Mechanism*: LFS activities should be monitored constantly by a designated cell that will be ready to solve any problem faced by its users. Strengthening monitoring mechanism can help maximum utilization of LFS.
8. *Regular Sessions*: There may be yearly/semesterly gathering of the teachers where they will discuss different aspects of LFS use and suggest ways for its improvement.

9. *Upgradation of the System:* Some students suggest updating chatting system of LFS on a par with Facebook and Skype while others want the option of uploading video clips as it may be done in YouTube. A few students want the system to be colorful like that of Facebook where they can share status, pictures and files.

Conclusion

LFS is still in a nascent stage. The findings of the study reveal that its use is limited and it has many problems. But if the teachers and students take utmost interest, and the administration takes measures, most of the problems relating to LFS may be solved. It will then be more powerful in its function and efficacy. The study also finds that LFS is an effective tool to teaching especially in improving students' writing and reading skills. However, the study attempts to delineate the benefits and effectiveness of LFS but did not depict any model or any specific techniques on how the system can be utilized properly due to the present unstructured database and limited number of actual regular users of LFS. So, further study can be carried out to explore those areas to find out more dimension of the effectiveness of the system. Nevertheless, individual teacher can use it creatively. That is, they may bring about various innovations in teaching through LFS subject to the course they teach. We can hope the use of LFS will increase day by day to the proportion that it will draw national and international attention. Other educational institutions will replicate it and utilize this wonderful tool to enhance the language proficiency of the students besides nourishing their subject knowledge.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey with Teachers

Questionnaire:

1. To what extent did you like the Learning Feedback System (LFS)?
2. At present, do you allocate marks for students' LFS use? If yes, what volume of marks?
3. What marks do you suggest to give to your students for their performance in LFS?
4. Do you find any limitation in using LFS?
5. Do you have any suggestions for further improvement of the system?
6. Do you think LFS is useful/ unnecessary for students' learning?
7. Please put forward any other comments of yours if any.

Appendix 2: Survey with Students

Questionnaire:

1. To what extent did you like the Learning Feedback System (LFS)?
 2. At present, do you acquire marks for your LFS use? If yes, what volume of marks?
 3. What marks do you love to receive for your performance in LFS?
 4. Do you find any limitation in using LFS?
 5. Do you think you could improve your writing and reading skills by using LFS? If yes, to what extent do you agree you have improved your reading and writing ability through LFS after completing a course? (please tick the answer)
 - a) Excellent
 - b) Good
 - c) Moderate
 - d) Not good
 6. Do you have any suggestions for further improvement of the system?
 7. Do you think LFS is useful/ unnecessary for your learning?
- Please put forward any other comments of yours if any.