

Constructing a New Blended Learning Technique: Using English Discovery as Learning Management System for Test Format Familiarity

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning offers numerous benefits to language learning and teaching. The benefits attract higher education institutions to implement the blended learning for advancing students' learning outcome. The need to boost students' learning outcome occurs simultaneously with the demand for higher education institutions to measure students' English proficiency. Consequently, certain English proficiency test is required for students' admission and students' graduation. Thus, this paper aimed to offer new blended learning technique to boost students' learning outcome and simultaneously to prepare students taking certain English proficiency tests. English Discoveries (ED) from Edusoft, as a tertiary from Educational Testing Service (ETS) was selected as learning management system (LMS) due to its vast topics and language skills coverage. Comprehensive materials and diverse practices from ED were used to be the resources for test formats familiarity. This study has shown that ED materials and practices were similar with TOEIC Listening and Reading sections and TOEFL ITP Listening, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading section. By learning in blended environment with ED, students were predicted to be more familiar with TOEIC and TOEFL ITP test formats. Being familiarized with the test formats should increase the possibility for students to have higher English proficiency score.

Keywords: blended learning; test format familiarity

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INTRODUCTION

1. English Language Teaching (ELT) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Advancement

Information and communication technology (ICT) has become one of the basic building blocks of modern society. ICT is vastly being used, applied, and integrated into activities of working and learning based on conceptual understanding and methods of education (Papadima et al., 2014). In specific, technology allows teachers to enhance classroom activities and language learning process (Ahmadi & Reza, 2018; Hashim, 2018).

The usage of technology has shown positive impacts on language classrooms, proven by numerous studies. Rosicka and Mayerova (2014) stated that technology provides more information and teaching materials resources, enhances students' motivation in learning, and maintain students' communicative competence. It also fully improves students thinking and practical language skills and helps teachers to teach efficiently (Pun, 2013). Shyamlee and Phill (2012) analyzed the necessity of multimedia technology in language teaching and brought up the problem faced in using technology in ELT. Anikina and Yakimenko (2015) found that online Tele-collaboration in EFL classes university students foster students' international communication skill, motivate language learning, enrich English language skills, and increase students' intercultural awareness.

Due to the numerous promising advantages that technology brings to language learning classroom, the needs to reveal more ICT opportunities in education becoming the researchers' concern. Jackman (2018) stated that digital technology has influenced a paradigm shift in education. Rosicka and Mayerova (2014) provided insight that the application of technology in teaching and learning sessions can bring more interest and motivation. By the help of ICT, the practice of language teaching and learning can be potentially delivered inside and outside the conventional classroom. Thus, blended learning is brought to pedagogy.

2. Definition and Practices of Blended Learning

The concept of having instruction inside and outside classroom with the help of ICT is embodied to blended learning, or sometimes called hybrid learning. An early definition by Garnham and Kaleta (2002) reported that hybrid courses are courses in which a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online, and time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced but not eliminated. Allen and Seaman (2003) referred to hybrid courses as a "course that is a blend of the online and face-to-face course. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, typically has some face-to-face meetings" Graham (2006) defined it as "blended learning systems that combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction and expands greatly on the convergence of two archetypal learning environments with critical dimensions of interactions".

Research historically has indicated that blended learning can have a positive impact on student outcomes including increasing student satisfaction (Dziuban & Moskal, 2011), improving student learning and success (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004), and increasing retention and access (Picciano, 2006). Picciano (2006) explains that well-designed blended learning environments have the potential of increasing access to a higher education because they improve learning outcomes. Research has also found that blended learning is the more effective instructional approach when compared to online and face-to-face instruction (Dziuban et al., 2018).

The benefits of blended learning attract higher education institutions. Many institutions, including those in Indonesia, are increasingly offering web-based courses mixed with classroom-based courses, including English-related subjects. As the need to advance students' English proficiency become more emerging, those English-related subjects are offered to prepare students facing English standardized test during their study in university-

level. The instructional modalities that is potentially offered in the English-related subjects corresponding with English standardized test preparation is test wiseness.

3. Test Wiseness and Test Format Familiarity

Bachman (1990) defined test wiseness as set of individual characteristics related to the amount and type of preparation or prior experience with a given test. Test wiseness is including individual consciousness of time management, familiarity with test items, and understanding of answering the questions being asked. Understanding test wiseness is beneficial for test takers at different ability levels. Students who are test wise can outperform students of equal ability who lack test wiseness (Cohen, 1998).

The range of test wiseness is test format familiarity (Houston, 2005). If students are familiar with the test format, they can maximize their cognitive ability merely on what is the answer. In contrast, if students are not familiar with the text, their cognitive ability is divided to how to answer and what is the answer. This cognitive division weakens student ability to answer, resulting in weak performance in answering the questions. This poor performance increase the possibility to obtain low score in English proficiency test.

Familiarizing test formats when taking the test should be highly avoided as this shows lack of preparation. Instead, students can familiarize themselves with English standardized test formats in the blended learning environment. The flexibility of time and space that blended learning helps students to be test wise and to familiarize themselves with test formats. Therefore, teacher can integrate English materials that support test formats familiarization for students in the learning management systems (LMS).

4. English Discovery as Learning Management System

English Discovery (ED) is a comprehensive English learning resource using internet multimedia technology providing courses, activities, and options to assist learners (Edusoft Ltd, 2002). There are more than 1.000 hours materials to be learnt online that covers both language skills and language features described as listening, reading, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and web literacy. The materials are distinguished by learners' levels adjusted with Common European Framework of References (CEFR). Each level is embraced with 10 courses with various topics. Each unit is consisted of 3 steps: Explore, Practice, and Test. Nonetheless, the materials provided in English Discoveries are flexible and able to be adjusted based on learners' need and institution's vision and mission.

English Discoveries covers 4 languages skills listed as listening, reading, speaking, and writing. In this present manuscript, the English Discovery (ED) is specified to be used as the materials for English standardized test format familiarity. The English standardized tests are Test of English as International Communication (TOEIC) and Test of English as Foreign Language Institutional Testing Program (TOEFL ITP).

5. Using English Discovery as Test Format Familiarity

5.1. English Discovery Listening Practices

Listening in English Discoveries is mainly based on American accent. This is why practicing listening in ED is beneficial for TOEIC and TOEFL ITP test takers. If students have difficulties in following the dialogue, they can click “see text button” to pop up the listening script. The listening practices in ED covers listening to short dialogue, listening to conversation, and listening to monologue.

5.1.1. Listening to Short Dialogue

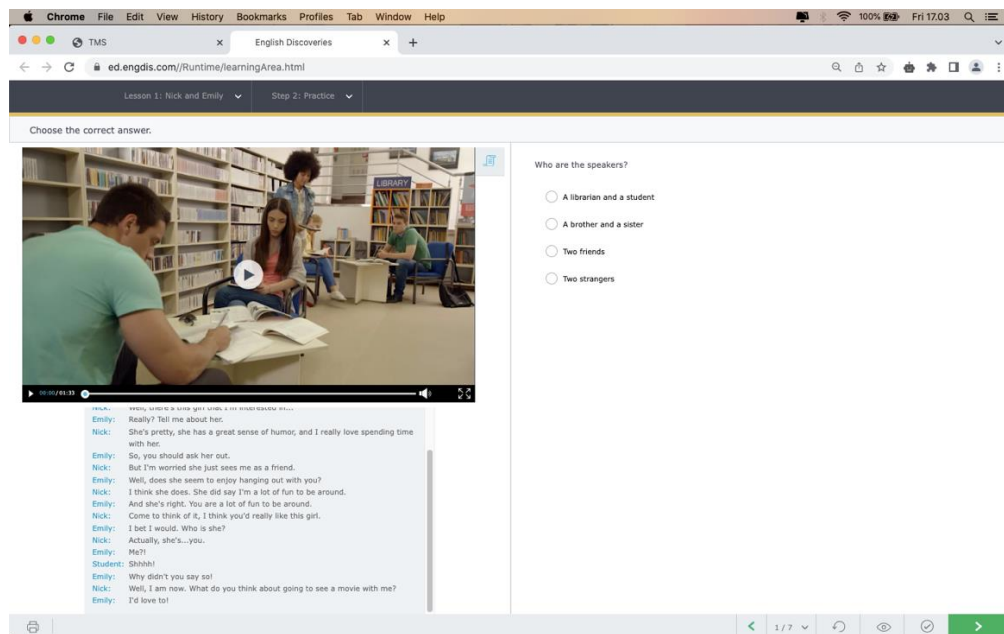


Figure 1: Listening for Short Dialog Practice

Unit in English Discovery always starts with listening to short dialogue. Students are showed short video, along with texts, and followed with a multiple question. This listening practice tests test-takers' listening comprehension, with additional visual support (video). This is similar with TOEIC Listening Part 1: Photograph, and TOEFL ITP Listening Part A: Listening Comprehension. In TOEIC Listening Part 1: Photograph, students are showed with a picture, followed by spoken multiple choices. There are 10 questions with 10 pictures. Meanwhile, in TOEFL ITP Listening Part A: Listening Comprehension, there are 30 questions with 30 short dialogues.

5.1.2. Listening to Conversation

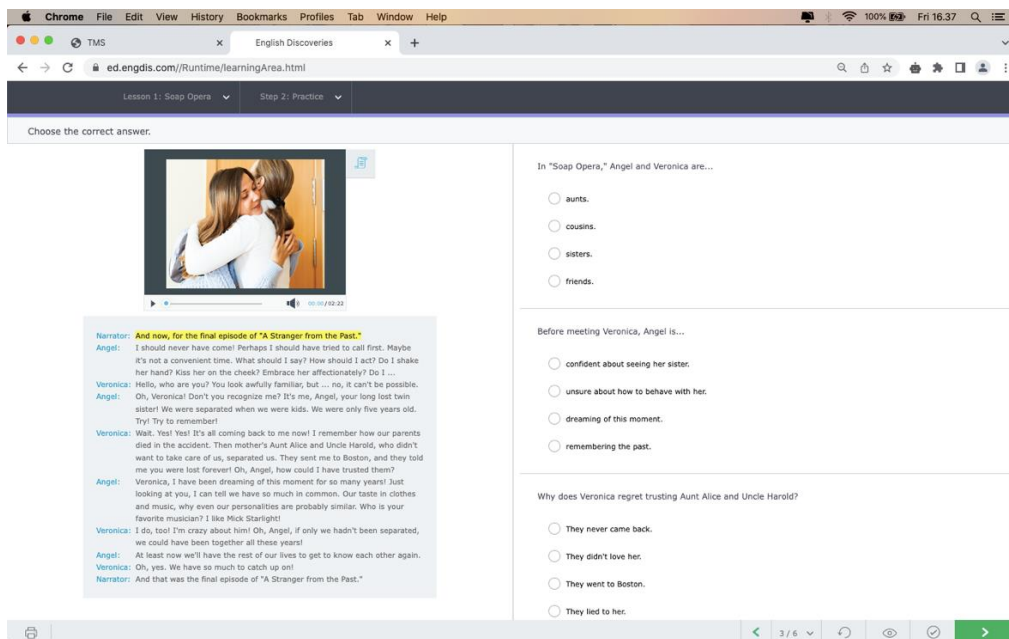


Figure 2: Listening to Conversation

In this listening practice, students hear short dialogue of 2 people. Afterwards, students are asked to answer 3-4 multiple questions. This listening practice is similar with TOEIC Listening Part 3: Conversations and TOEFL ITP Listening Part B: Short Conversations. The difference is that in TOEIC Listening Part 3: Conversations, there are in total 39 questions, comprised of 13 conversations with 3 questions each. Meanwhile, in TOEFL ITP Listening Part B, there are only 8 questions, comprised of 2 conversations with 4 questions each.

5.1.3. Listening to Monologue

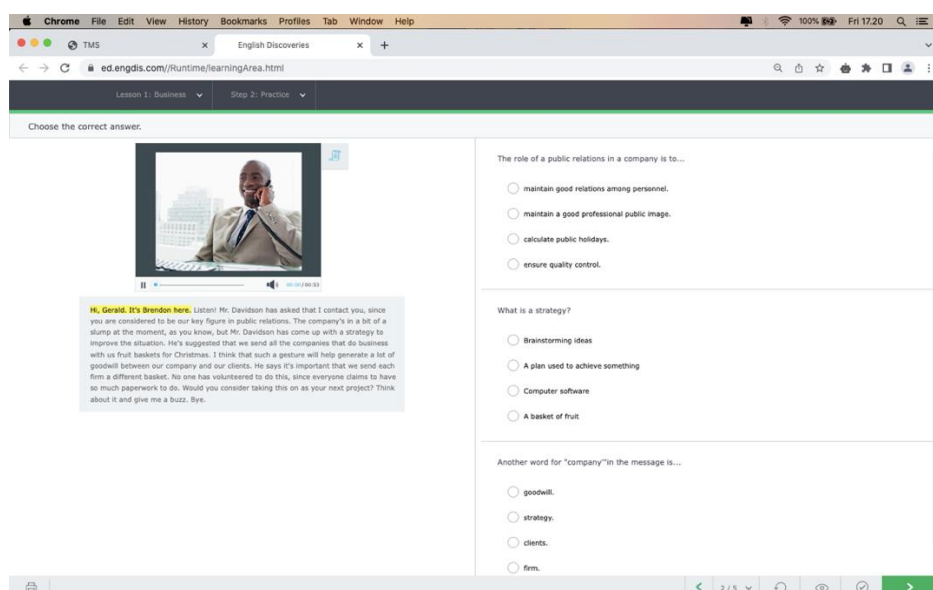


Figure 3: Listening to Monologue

Listening to monologue is usually available in higher proficiency level such as intermediate and advance. In this practice, the students hear long monologue (60-90 seconds), followed by 3-4 questions. The questions are mainly based on what, why, where, when, who, and how (5W+1H). Nonetheless, higher order thinking questions such as synonym, context, and inference are also being asked. This listening practice is similar with TOEIC Listening Part 4: Talks and TOEFL ITP Listening Part C: Long Talks.

5.2 English Discovery Reading Practices

Reading in English Discoveries covers broad topic such as family, business, academic, career, romance, economics, artificial intelligence, sports, education, etc. The vast topics of ED Reading covers TOEIC Reading that mostly about economics and workforce. Hence, the topic for TOEFL Reading Comprehension is also on the coverage of ED Reading topics such as academic, and education. Thus, students who practice reading comprehension in ED will be subconsciously familiar with reading in TOEIC and TOEFL. The reading passage in ED also varies such as emails, advertisement, and academic text.

5.2.1. Reading Email

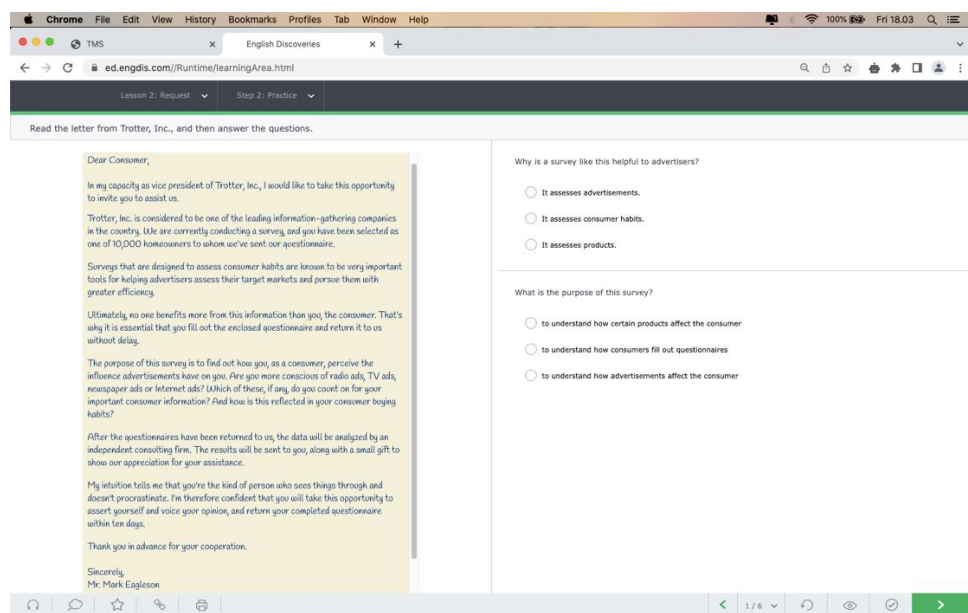


Figure 4: Reading Email

One of the reading passage types provided in English Discovery is email. Students are asked to read the email on the left page, and answer the question in the right page. On the bottom left page, there are some features that can be used for students. The features are "hear all" to make the reading passage be spoken by system, and "main idea" to find the passage's main idea. This reading practice is similar with TOEIC Reading Part 5: Incomplete Sentences that comprised of 30 questions. Test-takers are required to complete sentences from the reading passage that mostly emails or letters. This type of reading passage needs to be skimmed.

5.2.2. Reading Advertisements

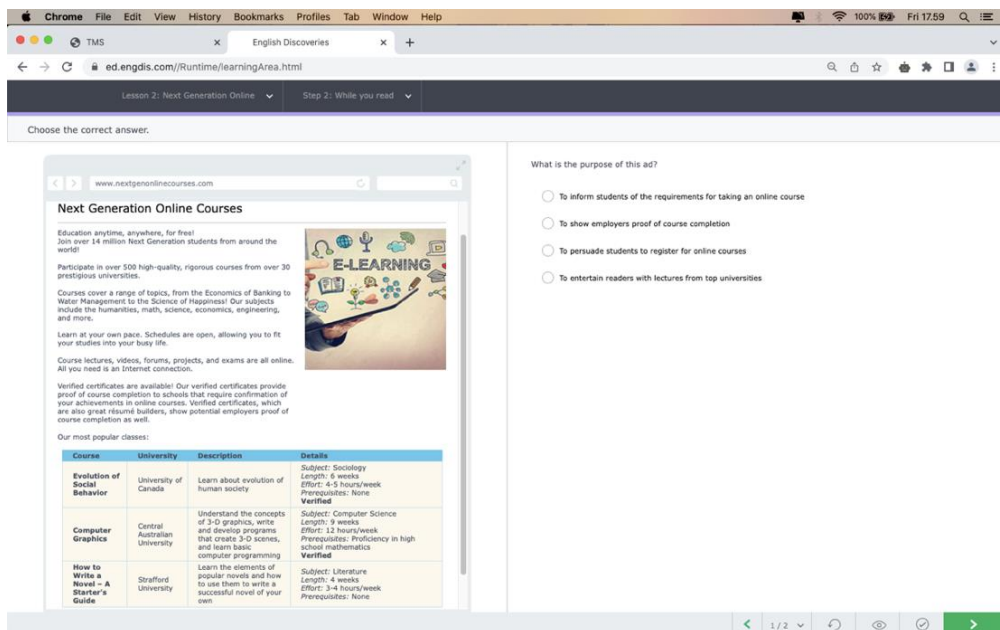


Figure 5: Reading Advertisement

Besides emails and letters, English Discoveries also provided advertisement as its reading passage. The advertisements are varying from brochure, graphs, magazines, and newsletters. This reading practice is similar with TOEIC Reading Part 6: Text Completion. The type of the task is not limited to multiple choice, but also fill in the blank, classification, true or false. Additionally, this type of reading passage can be used to practice students' scanning skill.

5.2.3. Reading Academic Text

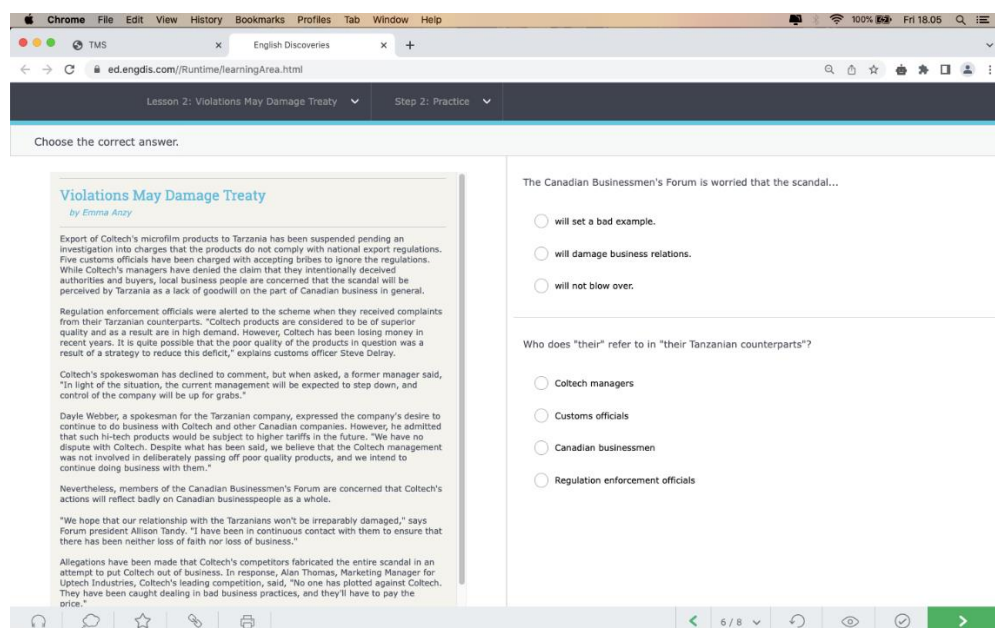


Figure 6: Reading Academic Text

Available online at <https://www.elitejournal.org/index.php/ELITE>

Academic texts are also the passage available in English Discovery. Vast topics are covered such as literature, history, engineering, humanity, arts, etc. Students are able to use this text to practice finding main ideas, supporting details, opinions, facts, and other detailed information. This reading practice is similar with TOEIC Reading Part 7 and 8: Single Passage and Multiple Passages, and TOEFL ITP Reading Section.

5.3. Speaking

Speaking practices in English Discoveries features a speech-recognition engine to help students autonomously improve their speaking ability. Additionally, there is a self-record function based on advanced speech recognition technology. Therefore, students are able to learn the difference between stand and non-standard speech sounds. The speaking practices covers pronunciation checking and respond to questions.

5.3.1. Pronunciation Check

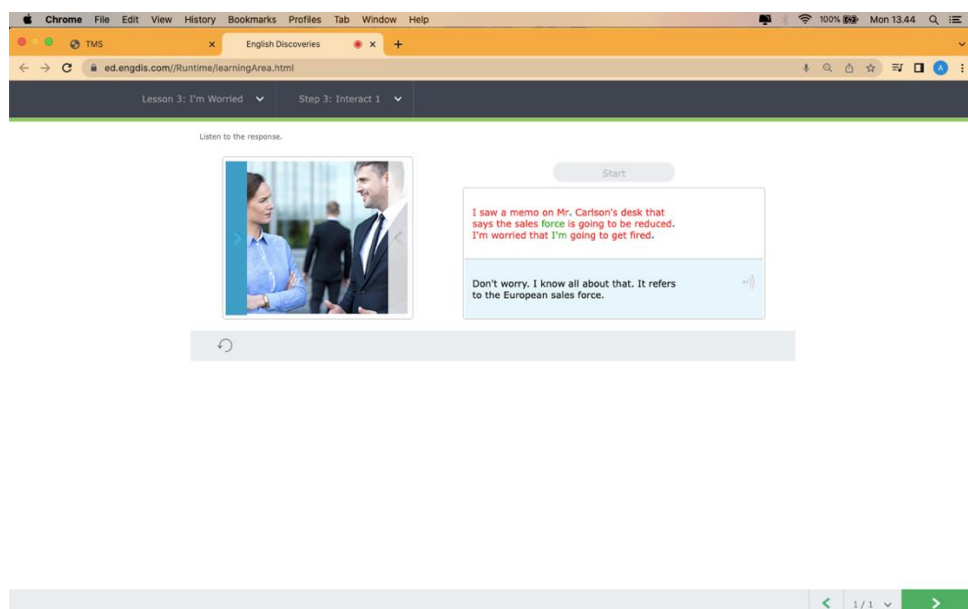


Figure 7: Pronunciation Check

In this practice, students can choose their role and practice their pronunciation. The word that has correct pronunciation will be marked green. Meanwhile, the red words are the room of improvement in which student need to improve their pronunciation. All of the pronunciation checking is done by system called a speech-recognition technology. This speaking practice is similar with TOEIC Speaking Task Read a Text Loud that require student to pronounce several words.

5.3.2. Respond to Questions

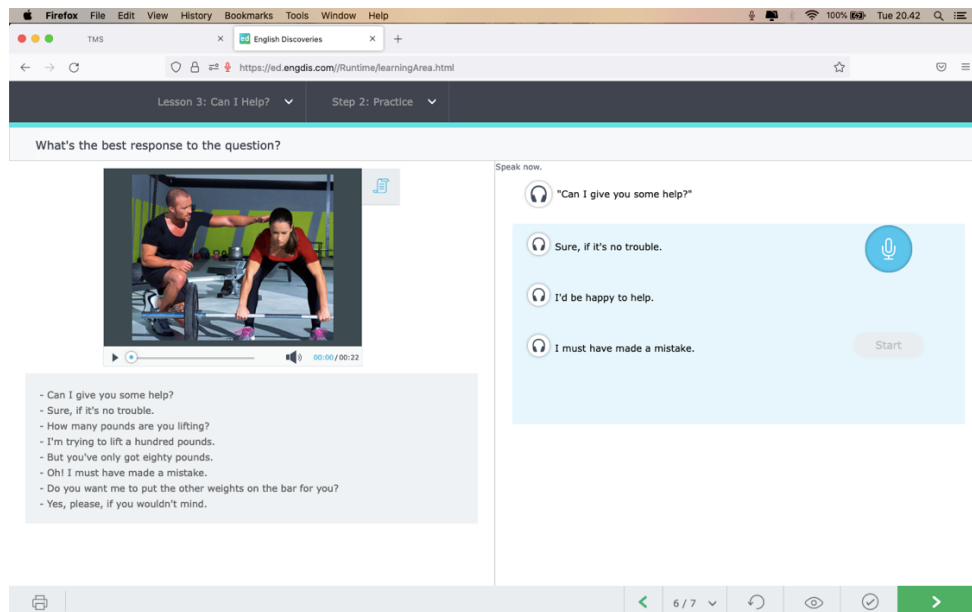


Figure 8: Respond to Questions

This speaking practice requires students to find the appropriate response for the question being asked. In order to answer the question, students have to pronounce the words. This type of speaking practice is similar with TOEIC Speaking Task Respond to Questions, and Respond to Question Using Information Provided. Additionally, this type of task is also similar with TOEIC Listening Part 2: Question-response.

5.4 Writing

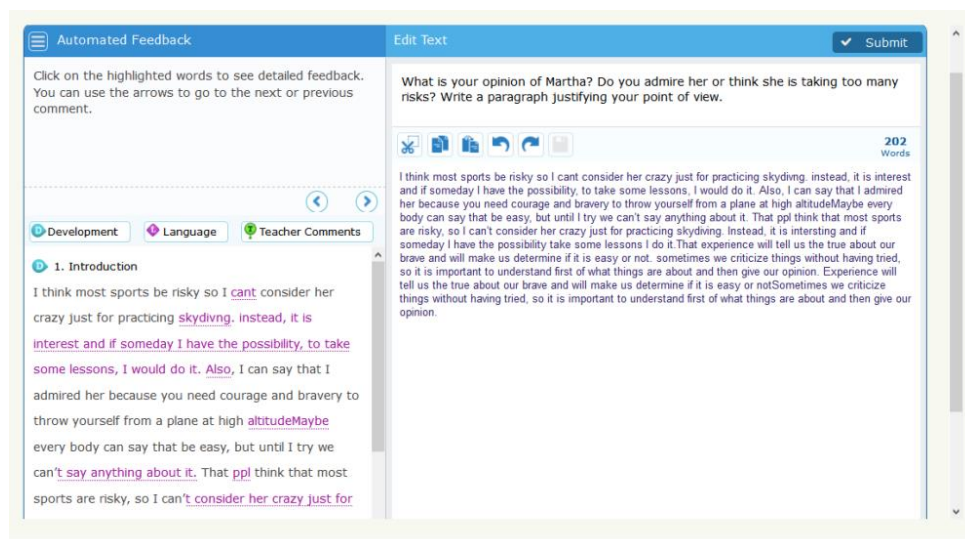


Figure 9: Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE)

In English Discoveries writing exercises, students can practice writing numerous types of text such as argumentative, descriptive, compare and contrast, and persuasive. After the students finish writing, there will be two feedbacks given; Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) and instructor's feedback. AWE is a standard feature in all writing practices. It provides instant feedback on usage, organization, style, and grammar. Thus, students can revise their work based on their feedback and re-submit for further evaluation. These feedbacks will enhance students writing. Related to the test familiarity, writing practices in English Discoveries has some sourced for stimulants; visual and audio aids, and textual aids.

5.4.1. Writing based on Visual and Audio Information

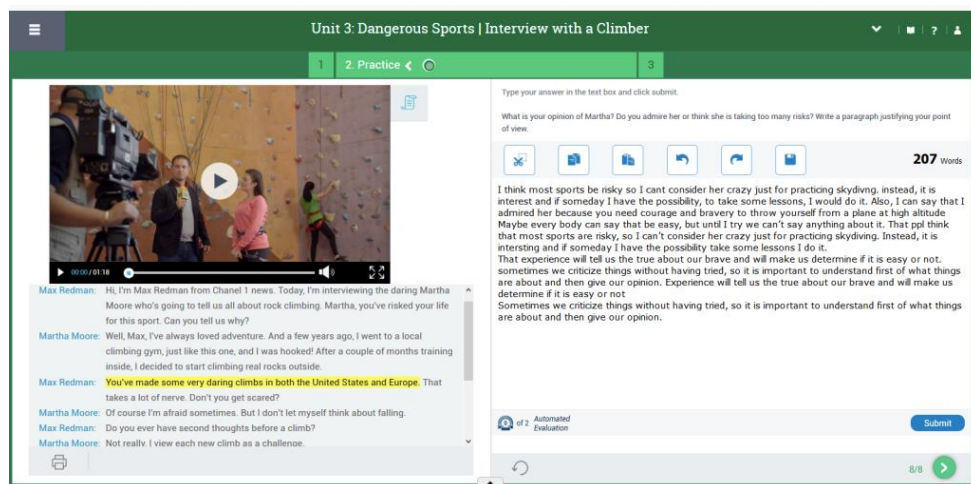


Figure 10: Writing based on Visual and Audio Aids

In order to give students stimulants for writing practice, visual information such as videos, pictures, and podcasts are available. Students are able to derive, extract, and rephrase the information to be added to the writing assignments. This is similar with TOEIC Writing Task: Write a Sentence based on a Picture. In the TOEIC task, there are 5 questions similar to this type of practice. Therefore, the more students doing thus writing practice, the more student will be familiar with the TOEIC Writing task.

5.4.2. Writing based on Textual Information

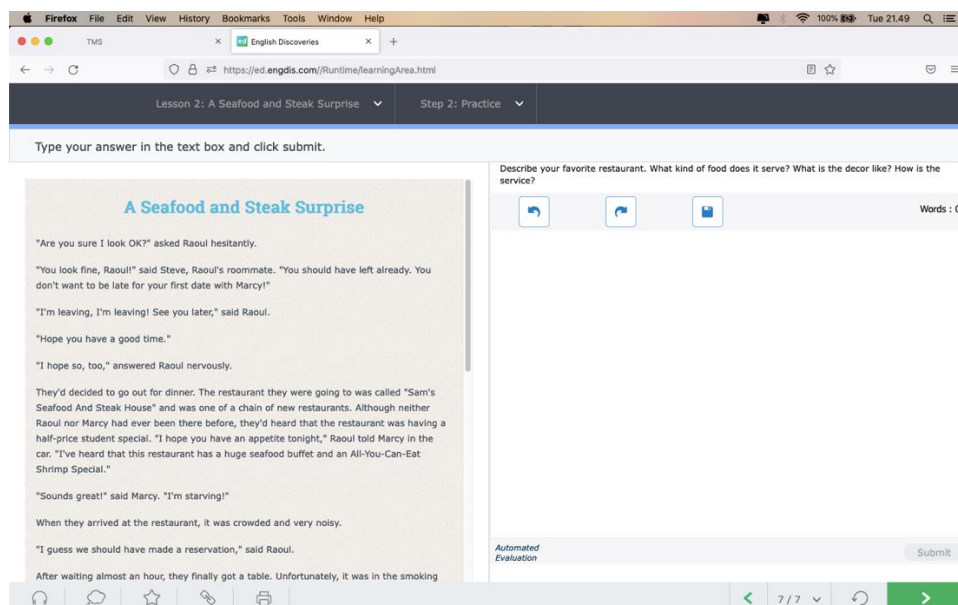


Figure 11: Writing based on Visual and Audio Aids

Other stimulant for writing practice is textual information. It can be advertisements, academic texts, emails, meeting memos, etc. Additionally, this type of writing practice is similar with TOEIC Writing Task: Write an Opinion Essay. The task requires students to state, explain, and support opinion related to certain issue. Students need to write an essay with minimum of 300 words. With English Discoveries, students can practice their writing skills before taking the real TOEIC test.

5.5 Grammar and Vocabulary

Language feature such as grammar and vocabulary in English Discoveries are being taught after listening, reading, writing, and speaking. This means that ED highlights the communicative use of language and contextual meaning. Grammar and vocabulary are being thought separately. Most of the materials are not merely explanation, but more on various practices.

5.5.1 Grammar in English Discovery

Grammar in English Discovery is mostly taught in lesson 4, after listening, reading, and speaking. Explanation is given in short description, highlighting more on the practice. So that, the students are not purposed to memorize the formula, but knowing the context on what specific language grammar is being used.

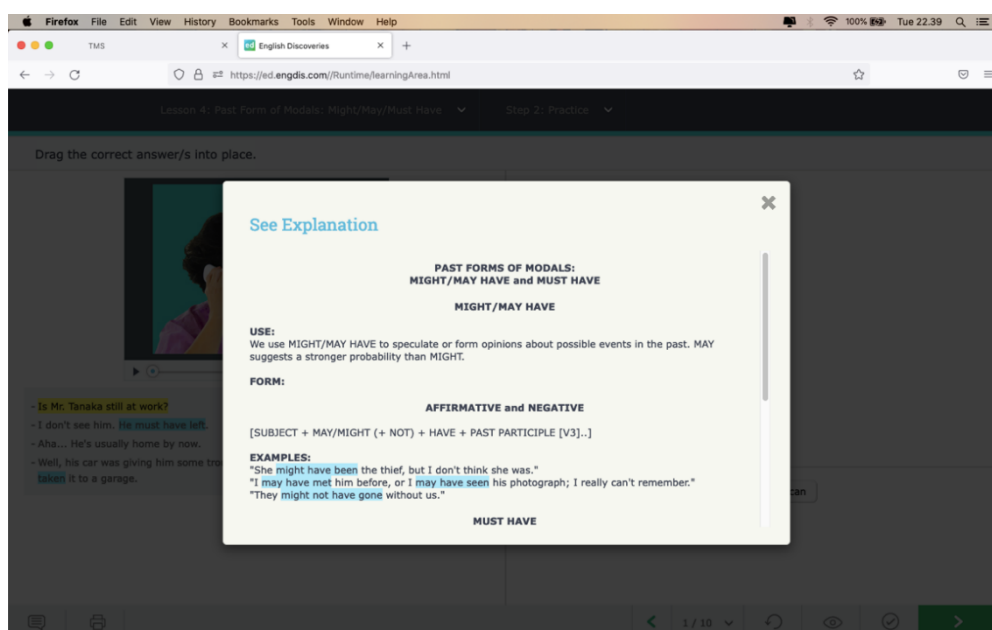


Figure 12: Writing based on Visual and Audio Aids

The types of grammar practices are multiple choice, fill in the blank, classification, and error recognition. The vast type of practice encourages student to think differently, encouraging more on problem solving skills. Students will feel easiness in doing similar grammar exercises such as in TOEIC Reading and TOEFL ITP Structure and Error Recognition.

5.5.2 Vocabulary in English Discovery

Vocabulary in English Discovery covers broad topics such as accounting, economics, education, information technology, and academics. Each unit in ED is themed to one specific topic such as working in accounting firm. Thus, the vocabulary for listening, reading speaking, and grammar, are related with working in accounting firm. In the last lesson, vocabulary is given in specific unit. Thus, the learning in English Discovery follows inductive pattern. Additionally, there is an audio aid for each vocabulary being taught in the unit. There is a "headset button" for the word pronunciation. When students need to find out how the word is pronounced, they just need to click it away.

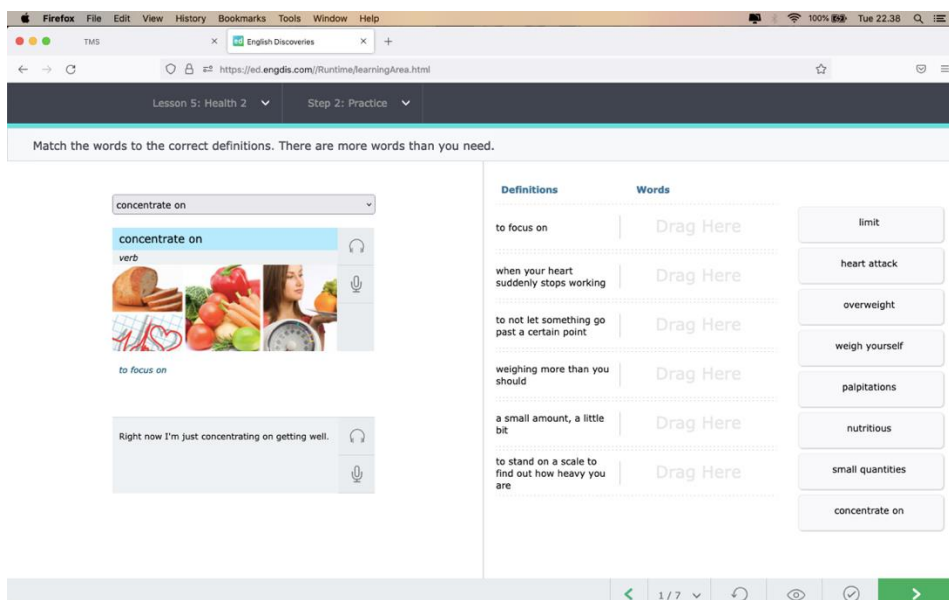


Figure 13: Vocabulary in English Discovery

There are numerous vocabulary practices such as classification, multiple choice, and fill in the blank. By doing those practices, students are able to comprehend how the words are used in specific context, rather just memorizing its meaning. These practices are somehow familiar with TOEIC Reading Part 6: Text Completion and TOEFL ITP Structure and Written Expression.

CONCLUSION

Blended learning is empirically advantageous due to its flexibility and practicality. Learning in blended environment offers endless possibilities. Creation and innovation in blended learning by education practitioners are increasing in numbers. This paper offers using a learning management system, English Discoveries, for test wiseness. In specific, the ED practices in listening, reading, speaking, writing, vocabulary, and grammar can be used for test familiarity as they are similar with TOEIC and TOEFL. Nonetheless, there are still limitless possibilities to unveil more blended learning technique. Future researchers are invited to innovate and to research more possibilities to enrich the literature of blended learning.

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