

Personal Learning Environments for Supporting Out-of-Class Language Learning

A Personal Learning Environment (PLE) is a learner-controlled environment for language learning. More specifically, it is a combination of tools (usually digital) and resources chosen by the learner to support different aspects of the learning process, from goal setting to materials selection to assessment. The importance of PLEs for teachers lies in their ability to help students develop autonomy and prepare them for lifelong learning. New technologies are making the creation of PLEs easier and their use more effective. Although PLEs can be created without the aid of technology, in this article I will consider their use mostly in the context of online resources. I will also discuss PLEs' use for language learning and look at ways in which teachers can use them to help students take responsibility for their own learning.

The challenge: How to encourage learner autonomy?

One of the challenges I have faced over the years is how to encourage my

students to develop learner autonomy. Most programs I've taught in have made it hard for me to do this; in Thailand, which is an English as a foreign language (EFL) instructional context, most students attended my class for only two hours per week and had very little opportunity outside to encounter and use English. Meanwhile, in New Zealand, where I do most of my teaching, students are not usually given credit for their learning outside the classroom. The majority of my students are at university, and their busy schedules thus make it unlikely they will spend much time actively planning and managing their own language learning beyond the requirements of the course. A problem common to all contexts I have taught in is that most learners are simply not used to learning on their own. Without proper guidance and ongoing support, many do not have the skills and experience to be successful in learning independently.

The main challenge then is to find ways to extend students' learning

beyond the classroom—to encourage them to take control over their learning while still being able to monitor and support them. I have found that using PLEs is an effective way to do this.

What are Personal Learning Environments?

PLEs bring together tools and resources that help learners control their language-learning process. These tools and resources are usually selected and maintained by learners themselves and can be accessed from a computer or (increasingly) from a smartphone.

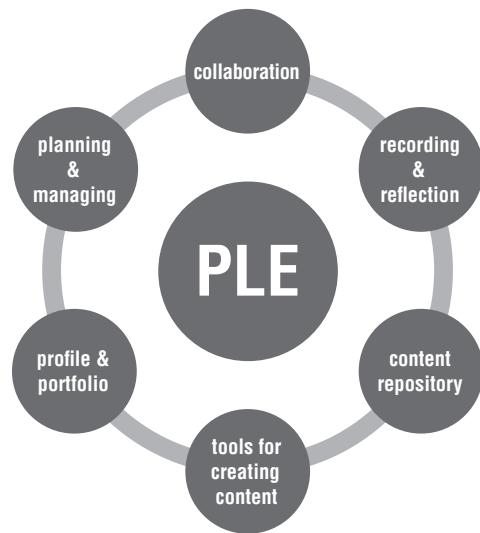


Figure 1. Common tools used to create a PLE

Figure 1 shows the common tools used to create a PLE; all of them help manage the learning process. For example, a portfolio (or e-portfolio if it is online) allows learners to collect evidence of completed work, as well as more formal achievements, such as course completions, grades, test scores, and so on. Learners can choose the extent to which they want to make this information public and share it with their teacher, peers, and possibly future employers. Related to the portfolio is a profile, usually public, showing learning experience, the language(s) the person is learning, and any other personal information the learner wants to share with others.

Collaboration tools allow learners to connect with others. Such tools can be designed specifically to help learners work together on a project, such as a wiki, or they can be more

general tools that learners use to post questions to each other. Examples include social networking sites like Facebook and Google+, as well as social bookmarking tools to share bookmarks of interesting sites for learning. Synchronous tools, which require participants to communicate in real time, such as chat or Instant Messenger (IM) programs and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) programs like Skype also fall into this category.

In terms of managing learning, various planning and monitoring tools help learners to set goals, create to-do lists for short-term actions (as Evernote does), and check progress. For example, mindmapping programs help learners brainstorm and categorise areas for improvement. Journals help learners record and reflect on their work and can take the form of a blog, a simple text document, or one of many dedicated programs and apps. Finally, a content repository is where learners store language-learning content, such as videos (for example, by subscribing to a YouTube channel), websites (which can be subscribed to with RSS feeds), shared documents and files (Google Drive), and so on.

Clearly there is some overlap between these categories, and different tools can be used for different purposes. For example, a learner could create a Google+ page, share certain posts with other learners, and keep private the posts that are intended for personal reflection. As will become clear, most of the tools in a PLE are not specific to language learning but instead are sites and apps that many students already use for a range of purposes in their everyday lives. In my own teaching I have found this familiarity to be a major benefit, as it means I have to spend less time showing the students how to use the technology and have more time to show them how to learn with it.

PLEs imply or facilitate certain pedagogic approaches to learning (Attwell 2007). They are individualised environments, specific to learners' preferences and needs. Learners tailor the environment with their preferred tools and use those tools in the ways that suit them, usually at times and in places convenient to them. PLEs are also social spaces that allow learners to connect with other learners, native speakers, and teachers. In this way, they are open environments, not restricted to the classroom but supporting interaction with the broader

community. The other main characteristic of PLEs is that they offer informal environments that learners themselves create without the help of a teacher and use in the full range of contexts that make up a learner's life. As a result, PLEs also extend beyond the immediate pedagogic environment of a course or a school and provide support for lifelong learning.

Those who are familiar with Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) might ask how PLEs differ from VLEs. Although terminology is used differently across contexts and is continually changing, in general VLEs are environments controlled by an institution or a teacher for the delivery of courses. For example, a course website hosted on Moodle or Blackboard places the responsibility for determining lesson content and sequencing, monitoring, and assessment with the teacher. Such environments often include some of the tools also found in PLEs, such as blogs or forums; of course, they are not static environments, and many teachers have succeeded in using such environments to give learners more control over their learning. But on the whole, VLEs are teacher-directed, institution-focused environments that support the delivery of set courses. In this sense they can be used as a complement to a PLE. Successful integration relies on students being able to transition from the VLE and continue working with their PLE once they finish the course or leave the school.

Of course, learners' success in doing that depends on a range of factors, such as their willingness to learn independently, their ability to select the most appropriate resources, and their knowledge of how to use them effectively. Clearly, there is a potential role for teachers to support learners in developing the necessary skills. That is the focus of the rest of this article.

Benefits of PLEs for teachers

Although many learners use PLEs informally, it is possible to bring PLEs into the curriculum as a non-formal complement to the course or as a resource for teachers to draw on. For one thing, the use of PLEs offers teachers a way to foster autonomy. Because PLEs include tools for goal setting and assessment, for example, they can be used to model, practise, and give feedback on different aspects of autonomous learning.

PLEs also make it easy for students to extend their learning beyond the classroom, so in this sense they offer a practical way for teachers to facilitate transfer of skills from the formal to the non-formal domain. Many of the programs included in PLEs allow the sharing of information, which means that teachers potentially can see learners' progress and give feedback.

Similarly, students can share content with others, and most PLEs include tools for this specific purpose. In this sense, PLEs can be used by teachers to support various types of learner interaction, such as group learning and peer feedback.

But perhaps the main benefit is that PLEs prepare students for ongoing development beyond the classroom and provide a practical means to introduce the tools that will support lifelong learning.

For these reasons, teachers may want to acquaint themselves with PLEs to enhance the long-term learning outcomes of their students. I now offer an example of how to integrate PLEs; I then discuss some of their practical and technical aspects.

Implementing PLEs in the language classroom

What follows is an outline of how I have integrated PLEs into my classes. The key is to make their use an integral part of the course by asking students to use their PLEs to take increasing control over managing all aspects of their learning. This is not something that can be done in one or two lessons, but rather is something that students should be guided towards throughout the course.

Extending the classroom with a PLE

Week 1

1. Provide a rationale. Explain to learners what a PLE is and why you intend to use it. Give them a rationale for the importance of knowing how to manage their own learning. If possible, particularly if you are working with tertiary students, consider asking a more senior student or a graduate to come in and share stories of needing to improve their English throughout their studies and careers and the importance of being able to do this by themselves.

2. Set clear expectations. Be clear to your learners about how (and how much) you want them to use their PLEs and what skills you want them to be able to demonstrate. For example, explain that by the end of the course they will need to be able to identify their own language needs, develop a learning plan, and monitor their progress.
3. Give incentives. Consider the possibility of giving students credit for using their PLEs, completing a portfolio, creating a learning plan, and so on.
4. Provide training in the use of a PLE. Show examples of some of the programs students can use—ideally, choose those they are already familiar with—and the types of information they can record. For example, show a learning record in Evernote or a student’s written reflection in a blog post.

Week 2

1. Because most students will have little or no experience in managing their own learning, it is important to start simple. One suggestion is to begin by asking learners to record what language they learn during the week, both in class and outside. Encourage students to use any tool they are already familiar with. In some contexts, students are most likely to keep notes on paper; in others, students are more likely to use a note-taking app on their phones. An alternative is for learners to audio-record their notes on their phones. Learners can also upload short videos of themselves on a private YouTube channel.
2. Ask learners to identify three things they found difficult. The difficulties could be related to English skills, to their learning in class (e.g., they found it difficult to concentrate in class), or their learning outside class (e.g., they could not find the time to practise or make themselves understood when conversing with a native speaker).

Week 3

1. Ask learners to share some of their notes. One benefit of sharing is that many learners are fascinated to see that others pick up very different things from class than they do; at the same time, many learners are reassured to see that they share similar problems in their learning.

2. Brainstorm possible solutions to problems learners have identified.
3. Pair students based on the similar problems they experienced. Explain that in the coming week, as part of their homework, they will try out some of the solutions discussed in class and share their experiences by posting their reflections on the social network of their choice. Tell them that they can include pictures, audio recordings, or texts—whatever gets their message across.

Weeks 4 and 5

1. Tell students that during these two weeks they will have to decide on one topic or skill (depending on the level of your students and the focus of the course) and develop a simple learning plan. For this they will have to identify (a) any resources (online or otherwise) they will use, (b) the estimated amount of time they will spend, and (c) the tools they will use to record and share their learning with you.
2. It is important to give students an example of what you expect their learning plan to look like.
3. Monitor students’ activity and give feedback. Optionally, students can comment on each other’s plans.

Week 6

1. Explain to students the importance of monitoring their learning and developing the ability to assess their progress, either individually, through self-assessment, or through peer feedback.
2. Model and practise giving feedback in class.
3. Take an existing homework task or assignment that is part of the course. Pair students and in the week following, ask them to complete the assignment and assess themselves and each other.

Toward the end of course

1. Show students one of the available e-portfolio tools and explain its purpose. Get them to add your course to the portfolio along with their personal summaries of what they feel they have learned.
2. Show students an example of a long-term learning plan and have them complete their own and add it to their preferred

application (e.g., a calendar, a blog, or—if students are working in pairs or small groups—a wiki).

3. Give detailed feedback to ensure students have a workable plan, which will encourage them to continue learning after the end of your course.

Of course, doing *all* of the above may not be necessary or possible in all situations. Although the amount of time needed is not as great as it may seem (as the use of the PLE is related to the course content), it is not insignificant. You may instead, for example, wish to focus on just one or two elements, such as getting students to identify their learning needs or to record their reflections.

Implementing PLEs in the language classroom: Technical considerations

As is true of most technological environments in education, the implementation of PLEs in the classroom has both a practical and a pedagogical side. At the practical level, there are a number of questions to consider:

1. Do I really need to learn how to use all those programs?

No. The point is to encourage learners to do this for themselves. You may need to know *about* different programs for, say, sharing documents online, but you do not need to install or use all of them yourself. In a sense, the tools within the PLE are like the books in a library; you do not need to read them all, just guide your learners in using them. In the PLE Resources at the end of this article, you will find a link to a website that offers a good compilation of software for different learning purposes; that can be used as a starting point.

2. Who builds the PLE?

The learners do. You may want to use some of the examples in the PLE Resources list as models to show learners what a PLE looks like and what tools it is made up of, but the responsibility for creating their personal environment lies with them.

3. Do learners need extensive technical skills?

Yes and no. They need to be comfortable using technology and in particular the Internet. But many of the tools used in PLEs are commonly available programs that learners are familiar with, such as social networking

sites, microblogs, and forums. What will be new for most learners is how to use these tools to support their learning.

4. How much information should learners share from their PLEs?

PLEs are highly personal spaces that contain information from beyond the classroom, or indeed outside the educational sphere. Many learners will also continue using their PLEs for years, and so the PLEs may contain information that is not related to your particular course. For this reason, learners may be reluctant to give anyone else access to their information. Luckily, most applications make it easy to share only particular information (for example, learners can choose to share one Google document, but not another).

5. Are there any privacy considerations?

As is the case with many social media, information can be shared easily with other learners or people outside the classroom. This has benefits for learning but at the same time also has obvious drawbacks. With younger students, safeguards should restrict access to this information. At all age levels, learners will need to be clear about what they are sharing with whom and what happens to that information, and teachers need to be on the lookout for bullying. In some situations, it might be helpful or necessary to explicitly discuss rules and guidelines with the class and perhaps have students sign contracts.

6. How about the cost of the software and support?

The vast majority of the programs used in PLEs are freely available online, and for programs that are not, alternatives are often available. Also, most of the programs are designed to be used by the general public and are very user-friendly; technical support is unlikely to be needed. The use of electronic PLEs does assume that learners have access to Internet-connected computers, either at school or (ideally) at home. This assumption cannot be made in all contexts or for all learners. However, an increasing number of students do have smartphones, and most of the tools for PLEs are designed to be accessed on them. Nonetheless, before implementing PLEs, you should check that the necessary hardware and bandwidth are available.

Implementing PLEs in the language classroom: Pedagogical considerations

At the pedagogical level, implementing PLEs requires examination of several other issues:

1. Moving towards learner control

The most challenging and also the most exciting aspect of using PLEs with learners is the way PLEs can have a profound effect on learning and on classroom teaching practice. For one thing, PLEs change the balance of power in class in that students take more responsibility for their learning. For some learners, this may be a new experience, and some may well question this change. As with all classroom practice, the best approach is to explain the rationale behind this aspect of PLEs. Another is to introduce student-directed learning tasks gradually and to give ample support. For more on introducing the concept of learner autonomy to learners, see Benson (2011).

2. Monitoring personal learning

Frequent feedback on personal learning practice is important, as is the inclusion of models of alternative and additional ways of learning, suggestions for further practice, and so on. Here are examples of the types of follow-up questions I would commonly post in reply to learners' reflections or records:

- Why did you decide to focus on this grammar point?
- Did that activity help you to practise what we learned in class?
- How else could you have done this?
- How did your classmates tackle this problem?

3. Assessing learning with PLEs

PLEs are not directly about language learning, but rather about organising, monitoring, and critically reflecting on that learning. It is important that learners see that you value the time they spend on these tasks. As with the assessment of learner strategies, there is no easy quiz you can administer or a score you can give. Nonetheless, you can rate the frequency, extent, and depth of learners' reflections, the amount of time they engage with their PLEs, the number of helpful comments they make on other learners' PLEs, and so on. Some teachers have successfully experimented

with learner self-assessment (see Ekbatani and Pierson 2000).

4. Encouraging out-of-class learning

PLEs are, at their heart, collections of tools for student-directed learning, and if they are to support lifelong learning, learners will need to start seeing and using them as such. This only works if learners perceive direct links with their language-learning practice and are required to make use of PLE tools in tasks that gradually extend beyond the classroom and the school. Learners could, for example, complete a group project and report their results online to share with other learners, who can then comment on them.

The impact of PLEs on learning and teaching practice

PLEs can lead to significant changes in the role of teacher, the learners, and in some ways the broader curriculum. As mentioned above, PLEs give students more control over their learning, which may disrupt regular classroom practice. Breen and Littlejohn (2000) discuss the role of negotiation and argue that the most successful classes are those that revolve around the learners, not around the teachers or predetermined and static sets of content. PLEs allow learners to explore their wants and needs and to share these with the teacher. In fact, perhaps the most important benefit I have experienced is that PLEs have allowed me to learn things about my students, their difficulties, their preferences, and their backgrounds that I would have otherwise not found out. This awareness has certainly made me a better teacher, but it also requires significant flexibility on my part. In addition to the ability to learn about and accommodate different learner preferences, teachers may also need to take on new roles, such as monitoring online portfolios, commenting on learners' posts, and giving feedback on language practice done outside of class. In this sense, the teacher's role becomes more of that of a facilitator.

PLEs can also affect the way the role of assessment is perceived. With their focus on lifelong learning, PLEs are less about test scores and more about cultivating learners' ability to find opportunities to improve by themselves, regardless of any educational support. This may require the development of alternative means of assessing not just

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