# A Moodle Course: Design and Implementation in English for Academic Purposes Instruction

**Zakiya Al Naddabi, Language Centre, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman**
**zakiyasa@squ.edu.om**

## Abstract:

This paper focuses on the use of Moodle as a course management system in teaching General Academic Purposes English at an intermediate level of an intensive language program. After describing the Moodle course and providing examples of its content, advantages of integrating it in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) will be pinpointed. Also, problems and concerns about its use will be presented. Finally, recommendations for future developments of Moodle as an e-learning component in the program and in similar EFL programs will be outlined, as informed by the described practice of designing and implementing a Moodle course.

## Context and Description of Practice

Moodle is an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (*Moodle*, 2007). Matt Riordan (n.d.), who provided a teacher manual on how to design a Moodle course, defined Moodle as an "electronic classroom" and

> the name of a program that allows the classroom to extend onto the web. This program allows a common place for students to go for many classroom resources. Using Moodle, you can post news items, assign and collect assignments, post electronic journals and resources, and more (p.1).

At the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman, students are prepared for their academic study by having almost a one-year of English language instruction as the language of instruction in their colleges is English. In an intermediate level of Intensive English Language Program (Level 4 IELP), the researcher[1] is a practitioner who has utilized e-learning tools offered at the Language Centre such as computer and e-learning labs and WebCT and Moodle learning management systems. In this presentation, the focus will be on the use of a Moodle course as a course management software and as a learning tool in the Level 4 IELP.

Moodle was first launched at SQU in 2005. There are currently two course management systems operating at SQU server, WebCT and Moodle. Some programs use one of them and some use both. The plan of the Centre of Educational Technology, which runs e-learning systems at SQU, is to try out Moodle for a while, after which it can be decided with which course management system the university can continue offering web-based learning environments, WebCT or Moodle. Level 4 IELP uses both systems, but the content on WebCT has been transferred to the Moodle course that was designed in January 2007 and piloted in the first block of the Spring semester for a group of over 200 students coming from level 3 or placed in level 4 after being newly admitted to SQU that semester.

When designing a course on Moodle, a designer can add either a *Resource* or an *Activity*. Resources involve composing a text page or web page; linking to a file or website; displaying a directory; adding an IMS Content Package; and inserting a label. The activities that could be added to Moodle are assignment; chat; choice; database; forum; glossary; Hot Potatoes quiz; journal; lesson; quiz; SCORM/AICC; survey; Wiki; and workshop. Making use of many of the features on Moodle, the Level 4

---

[1] The researcher is the course coordinator for Level 4 IELP who designed its e-learning component.

IELP Moodle course was designed to accommodate the content that was aimed to be uploaded into an online learning environment. In the Moodle course, some online activities were designed by the researcher and uploaded into Moodle. Students were given an orientation lab session to show them how to log into Moodle. Moodle has been part of the Independent Study component in Level 4 IELP along with the Independent Study Project and some computer-assisted language learning (CALL) software programs. The format of the course was designed as Topics to organize the course materials. The course involved the following components:

- **News Forum:**

In the News Forum (Fig. 1), students were informed of any additions or instructions on the use of Moodle activities. It was the place where news could be posted by the course facilitator. Some entries on Moodle were added or shown progressively during the course of 7 weeks and, therefore, the News Forum was used to direct students to check the new materials on Moodle.
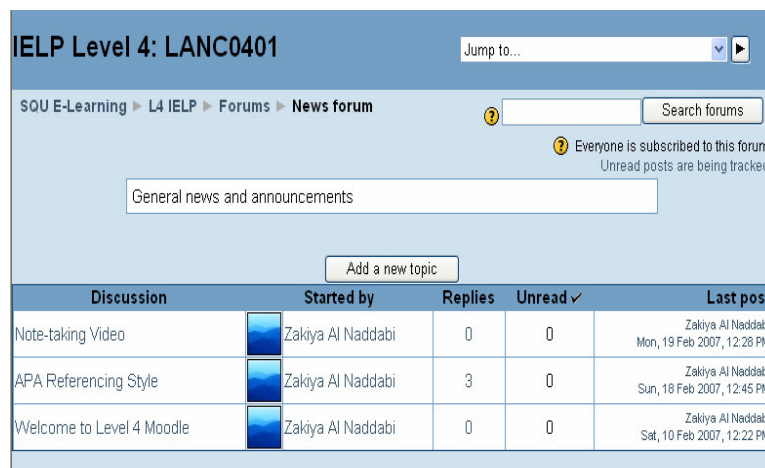


**Figure 1: The News Forum**

- **Information on an Independent Study Project:**

The main reasons for providing an online component to the course were: 1) to find a place to put some materials that would be useful for the students' Independent Study Project such as URLs, and 2) to reduce the amount of papers used for materials in this course component.

- **Sharing Forum:**

This forum was a discussion forum opened for students to post threaded discussions on topics of their interest or topics suggested by their teachers. It was mainly to discuss ways to do research for their Independent Study Project and prepare for oral presentations. However, many other topics were discussed by students such as posting comments on a picture posted weekly by a student; debating a controversial topic; posting information about an interesting topic; eliciting advice on how to learn and improve their English language competence; asking and answering questions about their projects, etc.

- **Links to Online Dictionaries and Newspapers:**

Some links to online dictionaries were provided to students in order to help them search for the meanings, usages, and pronunciations of new words encountered in their project readings or any other readings. Online dictionaries that students were referred to were Meriam-Webster, and Dictionary Online. In addition, in their Independent Study Project, some links to online newspapers were provided to help

students have access to articles that might be appropriate for their projects. Online versions of local newspapers such as Oman Tribune were recommended for students to browse. There were also some links to URLs of newspaper directories and international news websites such as the BBC and CNN News websites.

- **Computer Skills:**

In this block or topic, some computer language such as hard drive, monitor, etc. was presented to keep students aware of some computer-related lexicon.

- **Listening Quizzes and Video Files:**

Some listening quizzes (Fig. 2) were put in this topic for students to independently practice their listening skills and test their listening comprehension. The listening input was taken from the CDs that came with the listening book used in the program after getting permission from the book publisher to use the CD tracks online. For copyright concerns, the sound files were not allowed to be downloaded by students. The reasons for using the topics in the book were to recycle vocabulary items and to make use of more listening practice activities from the units that could not be covered in class in the course of 7 weeks. There was also another block specified for the course video materials. So far, a video on note-taking skills was uploaded into Moodle for students to watch and practice taking different types of notes from different modes of lectures. Students at SQU need some explicit academic instruction on how to take notes for their academic success, and such a stimulating interactive video enables them to independently learn how to take good notes.
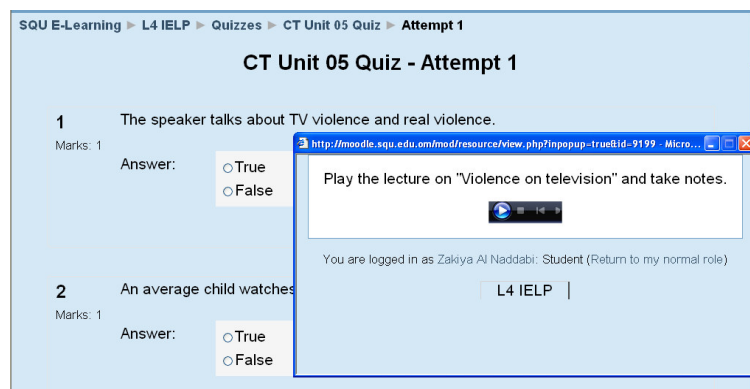


**Figure 2: A Listening Quiz**

- **Hot Potatoes Files:**

These files involved some exercises to practice vocabulary items encountered in the paper-based teaching materials. Crosswords, fill-in-the-blanks tasks, lectures with quizzes, etc were either designed using the Hot Potatoes Software or the enabled Hot Potatoes designer option on Moodle itself.

- **Reading Quizzes and Reading Journal Forum:**

The reading book that was used in the course came with some useful digital exercises that were uploaded into Moodle. The reading quizzes were meant for students to have an independent reading practice with a comprehension check done through quizzes. In the Reading Journal Forum, students were given the chance to post their journals, summaries or reflections on what they read. Teachers were able to respond to their students' journals and give personalized feedback.

These Moodle components were scheduled to be introduced by the program teachers every 2 weeks, but students were advised to use them in their own time as well. For example, reading and listening quizzes were progressively shown on Moodle so that students could do some practice on the units they had taken in their reading and listening classes.

## Advantages versus Problems

Using Moodle as an e-learning tool has given the students a chance to develop their language and academic competencies. The following are some of the advantages and benefits of using it.
- *Enhancing student-student interactions and teacher-student interactions:* Learner-learner interaction or peer-peer interaction has been widely encouraged in online as well as offline teaching and learning situations. Threaded online discussions in web-based and web-enhanced courses in the course web pages or web-based course management systems such as Moodle here are one of the teaching techniques, I would say, which promotes peer-interaction in an online environment (Fig. 3).
- *Finding a real audience to interact with:* Online peer interaction created a real audience for students to communicate with and get meaningful feedback on their contributions. Students also had the chance to scaffold each other to accomplish their online tasks.

| Champions League returns with extra spice | | Aamur Al Hatmi | 1 | 0 | Mohammed Al Sawafi Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:41 AM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| storm | | Qais Al Hinaai | 2 | 0 | Abdullah Qaitoon Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:36 AM |
| car accident | | Rehab Al Hammadi | 3 | 0 | Faisal Al Aamri Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:36 AM |
| HI | | Omar Al Seifi | 2 | 0 | Qais Al Hinaai Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:32 AM |
| How learn you English | | Salem Al Amri | 0 | 0 | Salem Al Amri Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:31 AM |
| How are yuo?????????????????? | | Aldheeb Al Alyani | 0 | 0 | Aldheeb Al Alyani Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:26 AM |
| storm | | Qais Al Hinaai | 0 | 0 | Qais Al Hinaai Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:22 AM |
| mobil phone | | Faisal Al Aamri | 0 | 0 | Faisal Al Aamri Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:22 AM |
| Hi | | Abdullah Qaitoon | 0 | 0 | Abdullah Qaitoon Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:20 AM |
| volcanoes | | Hassan Al Balushi | 0 | 0 | Hassan Al Balushi Mon, 26 Feb 2007, 10:17 AM |
| Hi | | Mohammed Al Sawafi | 0 | 0 | Mohammed Al Sawafi |

**Figure 3: Online Interaction and Threaded Discussions**

- *Helping students do their research for their Independent Study Project:* Students were given guidelines on how to do their project work. Guidelines were put online to allow students to have access to the URLs that might be useful for their research and to give them constant access to the project information which they could view online or print out to view offline at any time.
- *Fostering students' independence:* This was aimed at by giving them some leeway to organize themselves to practice their language and do their research at their own time and pace.
- *A change of routine:* As students got bored from being in two classes a day studying English, they found tackling technologies like Moodle fun and engaging as well as an interactive place that enables them to express themselves.

The content of the Moodle course was gradually built by the course designer and participants. Students, in particular, shared their opinions, information, and concerns by posting them into Moodle; which contributed to the content of the course and added a lively experience to it.

The Moodle experience described earlier was not fully bright as there were some problems and concerns in its implementation as follows:
- Logging 200 students into Moodle was a difficult task. When students were logged into Moodle for the first time, they were emailed usernames and passwords, but some of them did not work.
- Due to the fact that we had a large program, many students did not participate in Moodle activities, but they were not followed up by their teachers since it was not an assessed course component.
- As some teachers were not that much computer-literate, many students could not figure out what was happening on Moodle or what discussions were all about! The students were first year students who

had no prior experience on computers in the first place, so constant supervision and help from teachers were needed.
- In the Sharing Forum, subscription was enforced on course participants, which meant that emails of messages posted on this forum were sent to their emails, jamming their email accounts with unwanted emails. It took some time to solve this problem and realize that one single click on the settings of this forum meant a great deal!
- In the Sharing Forum, there were what Henri (1991) termed as "serial monologues," in which learners expressed their opinions without connecting much to the other's contributions with little of the instructors' presence or guidance (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003). Such monologues contradicted the purpose of interaction and communication with other students as they were sometimes never responded to by anyone enrolled in the course. Many students got overloaded with information as reported in other studies as well (Berge, 1999; LaPointe, 2003) due to the many postings that might have led some to read unread and simple messages without responding to any of them.


## Concluding Remarks

The reported practice reflects a teaching philosophy that views interaction as a "sustained, two-way communication among two or more persons for purposes of explaining and challenging perspectives" (Garrison, 1993, p. 16) with interaction being between a student (s) and the instructor, or among the students themselves, the latter of which was shown to have taken place on Moodle. Such interaction "does not simply occur but must be intentionally designed into the instructional program" (Berge, 1999) based mostly on the designer's interpretation of the world and his/her instructional philosophy. When designing courses with an online component, instructors need to carefully design interaction by the use of the tools offered in online technologies such as the use of the discussion forums or boards.

Learning in an online environment is viewed from the perspectives of the learning theories of social constructivism, socio-cultural theory, and the communities of practice theory that explain learning in light of the social interaction (LaPointe, 2003) guiding online peer-interaction. As for language teaching and learning, the underlying learning theory for the instructional design of technology for language instruction is the theory of constructivism (Lebow, 1993, Stepp-Greany, 2002) that has changed the roles of the teacher and students in the language learning process. Students use the medium to negotiate meaning by interacting, interpreting, and collaborating rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. Teachers, on the other hand, "provide a scaffold for students' learning with their own knowledge and experience … even when they are not immediately involved in a communicative exchange" as they play their facilitative role (Kern, 1996, p. 108). Students enrolled in the Moodle course interacted with each other and their teachers using the discussion board called the Sharing Forum. The social interaction between students bridged the gap between their interests and the focus of the course materials as the door was open for them to discuss topics of their choice and initiative. Besides, they interacted privately with their teachers to receive feedback on their reading journals. Such peer interaction has also established a connection between language skills and sub-skills (mainly reading, writing, listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary use) and academic skills (namely note-taking, researching, word processing, and written communications). The design of peer interaction in this course was developed by both students and teachers, which helped students connect to each other. In future developments of this Moodle course:
- More online vocabulary exercises and games could be designed;
- Other Moodle features such as Wikis and the Glossary could be made use of;
- Assessment features could be used officially to encourage students to practice some language. Some marks from the continuous assessment marks could be given to students depending on their performance and activity on Moodle components;
- Establishing better ways to guide students to log into the Moodle course;
- Developing more peer-interaction and grouping of students according to disciplinary studies for a more focused type of interaction; and
- Activating the roles of the other program teachers on Moodle.

Kern and Warschauer (2000) report that in many computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, the focus has been on the linguistic nature of CMC quantifying and categorizing the students' comments in

their discussions more than qualitatively analyzing the students' negotiation of meaning with each other. The focus of this paper has been to qualitatively describe and outline students' experiences with the Moodle environment. Thus, it is highly recommended that future studies analyze such experiences more qualitatively than quantitatively. It is also recommended that teachers become the designers of their own Moodle courses because they are the best to realize how such a course could help students in their studies. Moodle does not require much technical expertise in its design, but assistance from technical staff might be useful to make such a course a success.

In this paper, a description of a Moodle component of an English for General Academic Purposes course in an EFL setting was provided. Examples of the Moodle course content were shown to illustrate how this e-learning tool was used in a course that prepared students linguistically and academically to pursue their future academic study. Benefits versus problems in its design and implementation were pinpointed. At the end of this paper, recommendations for future developments of this web-based learning environment were suggested as future aspirations and lessons learned from the described experience. To conclude, using Moodle as a component in a language classroom does not only enhance students' language competence, but it also allows students to seize the opportunity to develop their academic competence through the use of the features offered on Moodle, particularly communication. As the main aim of the design and implementation of the language course described in this paper was to augment students' language and academic competencies, future uses of Moodle as a course management system in the described setting and in other similar settings should accommodate for the development of these competencies by exploiting Moodle features to foster more interaction and communication. This paper has shown how interaction in an online environment could be designed by a course designer, but it has also illustrated how implementation of an online course could be affected by the interaction added by course participants especially students.

# References

Berge, Z.L. (1999). Interaction in post-secondary Web-based learning. *Educational Technology, 39*(1), 5-11.

Garrison, D. R. (1993). Quality and theory in distance education: Theoretical considerations. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education*. New York: Routiedge.

Henri, F. (1992). Computer conferencing and content analysis. In A. R. Kaye (Ed.), *Online education: Perspectives on a new environment* (pp. 115-136). New York: Praeger.

Kern, R. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Using E-mail exchanges to explore personal histories in two cultures. In M. Warschauer (Ed.), *Telecollaboration in foreign language learning: Proceedings of the Hawai'i symposium* (pp. 105-109). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center.

Kern, R., & Warschauer, M. (2000). Theory and practice of network-based language teaching. In M. Warschauer & R. Kern (Eds.), *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

LaPointe, D. K. (2003). Effects of peer interaction facilitated by computer-mediated conferencing on learning outcomes. Paper presented at the 19th Annual conference on Distance Teaching and Learning. The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Retrieved April 1, 2005 from: http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/Resource_library/proceedings/03_62.pdf

Lebow, D. (1993). Constructivist values for instructional systems design: Five principles toward a new mindset. *Educational Technology Research and Development: ETR&D, 41*(3), 104-116.

*Moodle*. (2007). Retrieved 14th of May, 2007 from http://acronyms.thefreedictionary.com/MOODLE

Pawan, F., Paulus, T., Yalcin, S., & Chang, C. (2003). Online learning: patterns of engagement and interaction among in-service teachers. *Language Learning & Technology, 7*(3), 119-140.

Riordan, M. *Moodle: An electronic classroom*. Retrieved 9th of May 2007, from http://www.squ.edu.om/cet/elearn/moodle.html

Stepp-Greany, J. (2002). Student perceptions on language learning in a technological environment: Implications for the new millennium. *Language Learning & Technology, 6*(1), 165-180. Retrieved March 11, 2005 from: http://llt.msu.edu/vol6num1/STEPPGREANY/default.html