

Moodle in the writing lab: Foregrounding task design as topic in instructor-learner exchange

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Introduction

The *Moodle* course management system provides an enabling environment for the delivery of English as a second language instruction. This paper presents a by-product use of *Moodle* as a textbook authoring environment, and opens a related question: does on-the-fly in-class task revision in the *Moodle* classroom environment create a scenario which supports (or in fact gives rise to) learner initiated discussion of task issues such as effectiveness, performability and appropriateness?

Scenario

The Technical Writing 2 and Research Writing courses (4 months each) at Kochi University of Technology (KUT) were explicitly designed for non-Japanese engineering doctoral students in the first year of a three-year scholarship degree program. Since 2005 these courses have been delivered in a *Moodle* environment in a CALL lab. The author's original reasons for adopting *Moodle* were simply the electronic delivery of course material and the management of submission of student work (the "electronic workbook in the electronic classroom" approach).

In 2006, the author decided to stop using the (rather good, very long, quite expensive) textbook, Swales and Feak (2004) as a course book, and began using a set of writing strategy materials (Hunter, 2008) which he had gradually built while developing a *Moodle* based writing program. Those web-based learning materials were partly adaptations and extensions of the Swales and Feak material, and partly practical implementations of existing theoretical works, including Gopen and Swan's (1990) read-

ability work and Hengl and Gould's (2006) pragmatic studies of publishability. The syllabus structure of Hunter (2008) is shown in Figure 1.

Theme	Audience	Structure	Writing technique
Writing styles			
Accessibility			
Purpose of writing			
Effectiveness			
Clarity			
Using model language			

Figure 1. the content structure of Hunter (2008) indicates a pragmatic instructional approach

Clearly this pragmatic approach to writing instruction is an abrupt departure from traditional grammar oriented approaches. The students in the KUT doctoral writing courses come from countries with grammar-dominant instruction and practice in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and the writing strategy approach embodied in Hunter (2008) meets initially with considerable learner dismay, doubt and suspicion. Thus the scene is set for extensive instructor-learner negotiation of task issues.

Shift to Moodle based delivery of writing course instruction

Prior to the author's adoption of Moodle, the CALL labs at KUT were redeveloped with a fully functional, richly supported Moodle course management system (CMS) environment. The author, having written several English textbooks and at the same time being sensitized to the rapidly changing education technology scenario, decided to shift the emphasis in his CALL lab course delivery from website-based input materials and email exchanges of student work and instructor feedback to a basic level of Moodle delivery with downloads of task files and uploads of completed task.

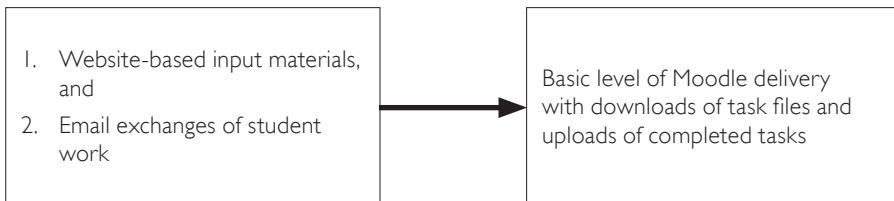


Figure 2. 2006 shift in CALL lab approach to curriculum delivery

Task development within the Moodle environment

After one year of Moodle delivery of the writing courses, the author conceived of the possibility of developing a writing textbook within the Moodle environment, managing files and refining task as the course proceeded, and eventually downloading resources and lesson memos as the body of a textbook.

Shift of task design focus: from ease of input/output to variation of processing

From a task design perspective, Moodle is useful: it enables the mechanics of file management and delivery to such an extent that the instructor can easily, readily vary the mode of language input and output within each task. This can lead naturally to the designed variation of processing required by each task.

For example, in one traditional writing task, the learner is given a set of written instructions and some text input, and is asked to follow the instructions in the manipulation of the text. One simple variation is to make the instructions available only as a sound file accessible via the course Moodle environment, and to ask the learners to analyze some aspect of the text rather than manipulating it. This is easily done in the Moodle environment, and results in a very different kind of processing on the part of the learner performing the task.

Such alternative task design can give rise to uncertainty in learners who have for years been given tasks of a uniform nature; this in turn gives rise to an increase in learner negotiation (confirmation, clarification) of task with the instructor. Metalanguage emerges and can become dominant; talk about task becomes common, supplanting talk within task.

The unique learner: instructor catering to a herd of niches

"Academic writing" covers a broad and diverse group of research topics and discourse conventions. Even within the narrowed target of learners in an engineering faculty, the mandate of the writing instructor is complex. Boettcher's (2003) Core Learning Principle #3 is that "Learners bring personalized and customized knowledge to the learning experience, and develop personalized and customized knowledge." The complexity is deeper than that, however: the target knowledge domain is different for almost every learner. The niche research fields of today's engineering all have their own target journals for publication, their own arcane lexis, jargon and even format, and their own degree of abstraction (compare engineering physics' mathematics-like discourse to the 'concrete' referents of civil engineers working on reinforced concrete issues). Thus there is the unavoidable question as to how to create task suitable for all the learners.

Textbook authoring motive and on-the-fly editing/redesign

The instructor of technical academic writing (TAW) must either create input and task tailored to each learner/learning scenario, or create input and task which are generalizable across the spectrum of learner/scenario. Here the author chose the latter tactic. The question arises: how then to tailor any input or task to those diverse learners in their diverse scenarios? One answer is to negotiate appropriateness, usefulness, motivational value and other learning variables on the fly, as the class proceeds week by week.

The mechanics of distilling textbook material from Moodle content

The Moodle environment allows for a variety of views of the content, including Learner, Instructor, and Administrator. Moodle's instructor view (with the editing function turned on) allows the instructor to insert links to files and existing online tasks such as Hot Potatoes tasks, and to create tasks such as uploading files of completed work. The instructor view environment allows easy access to folders of previously uploaded learning materials such as Word and media files. When a course is completed, the content of the Files folder can be downloaded, along with the content of the student interface (all the lesson introductions and blog-like content) that the learner sees in the main page of the course Moodle. The Files folder is particularly easy to use as a source of textbook material if the files have been named appropriately. For example, if the course has 15 class meetings, the first two characters of each file name could be the number of the class. Alternatively, if the course has four main themes, e.g. Sequence, Cause-effect, Inference, and Pro-con, the file names could begin with a few characters which indicate the theme, e.g. SEQ_vocab.doc, INF_oral.doc, PC_project.doc, CE_eval.xls

Instructor-learner discourse shift: from task content to task nature

During the first two months of the 2007 eight-month writing program, the topics of in-class learner initiated learner-instructor discourse changed in nature. Task content (ease and mechanics) remained a main theme, and in addition, learner-instructor discourse began to also address task nature issues (effectiveness, performability and appropriateness). This may well have been a result of the repeated instructor inquiries during class as to the learners' feelings about these issues, but extensive ethnographic study is needed to determine if there is a correlation between the two factors.

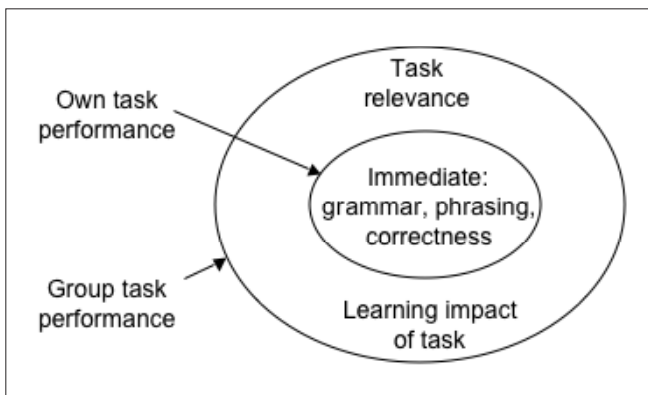


Figure 3. A speculative representation of learner attention in mid task. Here the outer circle represents the new behavior which emerged by the end of the second month of the 8-month 2007 course.

Multiple views of task for a collectivist environment

The Moodle interface also allows for dynamic discussion of text manipulation: in class discussions about register, readability or conciseness (to name but a few central aspects of text), the text window for the day's lesson (Moodle calls it 'Topic') can be used for the instructor's instructive manipulation of text in response to learner suggestions or instructor demonstrations. If the instructor's computer monitor content (showing Instructor view) is projected on the large screen, and the learner's computers are showing the same content but in Student view, the instructor's text grows different from what is shown on the learner's machines – until the instructor saves the changes and the learners refresh their web browsers.

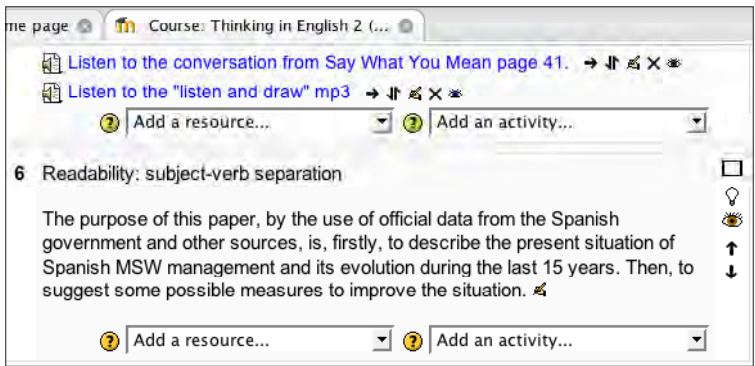


Figure 4. Initial text for an instructor demo (Teacher view, editing on).

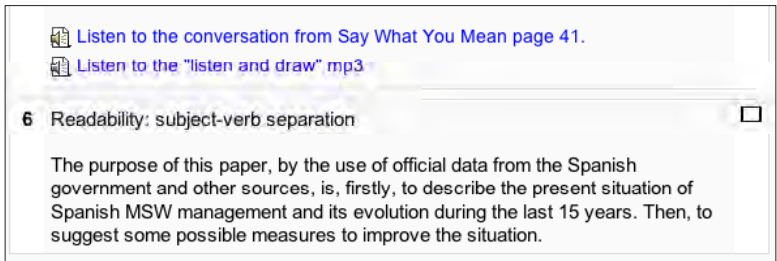


Figure 5. Initial text for an instructor demo (Student view).

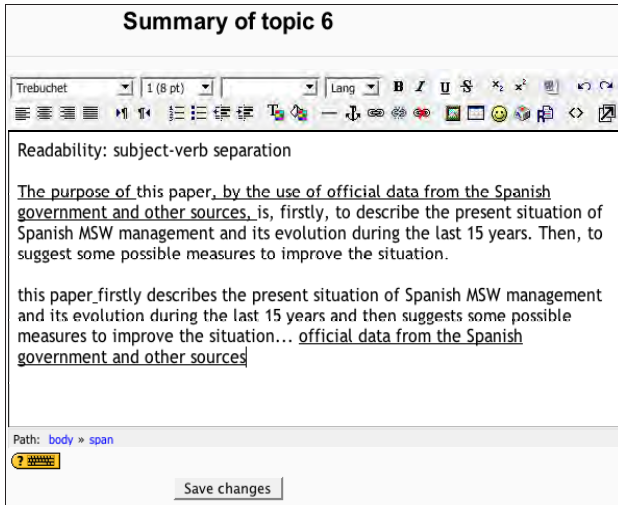


Figure 6. Altered text in an instructor demo (Teacher view, editing on, changes saved).



Figure 7. Altered text in an instructor demo (Student view after browser refresh).

The demonstration process, iterations of instructor change-and-save followed by learner browser-refresh, creates a collaborative, interactive atmosphere.

Multiple views of task as an inroad to perspective maintenance in task negotiation

The atmosphere created in the multiple views scenario for text manipulation sets the stage for collaboration at a higher level of abstraction: task negotiation. In task negotiation, negotiated issues include:

1. Task type and difficulty.
2. The wording of task instructions.
3. Task time allotment.
4. Relevance and performability of task.

Observations

Over the period of the two writing courses, informal observation identified two main features emerging in classroom discourse:

1. Learners proactively criticized the materials and readily gave feedback on readability and comprehensibility. This behavior increased in frequency during the course, particularly after the unit on readability of text.
2. Instructor willingness to revise tasks on the fly (thanks to the lab environment) led to learners partaking in, and even at times initiating, negotiation about task size, time allotment and (eventually) design.

Learner conscious attention horizon: locus of the learner's attention

The learner in mid-task is paying attention to several aspects of the task, and likely attending subconsciously to others. Asking the learner to pause mid-task and reflect on design aspects of the task is intrusive, and often evokes learner frustration or annoyance at the interruption of train of thought. Experience with the *Moodle* scenario suggests an interesting question: does the computer lab/*Moodle* environment create a physical environment in which learners can more easily move back and forth between task effort and task design reflection?

Conclusion

The need for ethnographic study of task related learner attention

Clearly the above observations and discussion are after the fact, and speculative. What is presented above does suggest a direction for future study and a tentative initial framework for such study. More specifically, some central questions are:

1. Does scaffolding of learner feedback about task enhance feedback in terms of volume, reflective quality or frequency?
2. Is the mid-task solicitation of learner feedback about task design detrimental to learner task performance?
3. Is it possible to create a learner feedback taxonomy or framework which will facilitate promptness and reduce cognitive load in task negotiation?
4. Is learner feedback in task negotiation scenarios different in nature from post facto feedback in questionnaires?
5. Is learner feedback on task design valuable in the redesign of task?

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