The Design and Development of English Writing Courses Based on the Moodle e-Learning Platform: their Effectiveness

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Abstract

This article surveys the design and development of effective English writing courses based on Moodle. It aims to assess the use of Moodle for teaching and learning writing and to investigate students' and teachers' attitudes to Moodle *modules designed for writing activities*. In this study, Cross-sectional Survey Research was used to investigate p*articipants'* attitudes to Moodle *for writing courses* and modules designed for writing. P*articipants were 121 students* of Modern English Composition Classes at *STU-IPTC and 183 teachers of* Instructional Technology Classes at HCMCOU, trained in Moodle, offered accounts and privileges of designed courses to practice and experience for a long time, and qualified for the investigation. The data collection method was the questionnaire, including three issues: Individual Information, Moodle for Writing Courses, and Designed Writing Modules. *The research results revealed that both students and teachers highly valued* the use of Moodle-facilitated teaching and learning writing. *Furthermore, they strongly agreed Moodle designed modules developed writing skills:* recognition of text structure, the provision of a stimulus and reality for writing, the practice of developing writing style creative, collaborative, and interactive. *The implications* of the *study showed that* high-quality designed courses resulted from cooperation between designers, teachers and technicians in exploiting features of tools and technical aspects of Moodle. Moreover, significant achievements of the study helped to determine the acceptance and use of the Moodle in combination with a face-to-face classroom to improve the teaching and learning of writing.

Keywords: communication tools, inquiry and discovery-based learning, Moodle, writing process, writing activities

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Writing is considered as an important tool of communication. Thus, it is necessary to build the environment for the development of efficacious writing.

Up to now, there have been three writing environments. Firstly, paper-based writing is a popular, traditional, and academic environment but it lacks word processing, graphic enhancement, and format support. Secondly, web-based writing has faster text processing speed and more support tools but it only provides simple communication and lacks customizations of learning activities, diverse writing activities, and management of combined activities. Lastly, the LMS (Learning Management System) for writing, especially for Moodle, integrates advantages of two writing environments above. It was just used to write a textbook (Hunter, 2008), news story (Cheung, Fong, & Wong, 2006), and focused on assignments in the collegiate classes with technical difficulties and pedagogical challenges (Wu, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to build an effective writing environment to overcome foregoing gaps.

From the foregoing writing environments, it is easily realized that Moodle was considered as the best choice and may satisfy the requirements of university education (Itmazi & Megías, 2005, p. 3; Al-Ajlan & Zedan, 2008, p. 63). In order to facilitate teaching and learning writing, it is required to design and develop online writing courses based on Moodle.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

From the background above, to facilitate and improve teaching and learning writing, STU-ITPC (Saigon Technology University – International Training Programs Center) has recognized that Moodle along with a face-to-face classroom as an ideal platform for designing and developing effective writing activities.

However, currently paper-based writing lacks tools of word processing, web-based writing lacks management of combined activities, and the LMS for writing, especially Moodle, only focused on writing in a collegiate environment and encountered technical problems and pedagogical challenges (Wu, 2008). Thus, there are really convincing rationales for designing and developing effective writing courses, including resources and activities, based on Moodle.

1.3 Research Questions

　　　1. To what extent does the use of Moodle facilitate teaching and learning writing?
　　　2. How do students and teachers respond to Moodle modules designed for writing activities?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Research Studies on the Moodle System

Empirical research studies into the Moodle system for English writing activities related to many features to enhance instructors' teaching and to facilitate students' learning, especially for cooperative activities.

The following is some typical research studies in connection with writing activities based on Moodle. The perceived usefulness and ease of the use of Moodle led to the acceptance and use of Moodle (Šumak et al, 2009). Moodle was the best system among other LMS software to meet training requirements of university education (Al-Ajlan & Zedan, 2008). Most of the students who participated in interactive writing activities based on Moodle achieved significantly better experience and learning effects than those who did not (Liao & Lin, 2011). The Moodle learning environment offered effective written communication tools and made a friendly space for group activities (Liao, F. Chen & T. Chen, 2011).

Thus, from previous empirical research studies, it is deduced that the implementation of writing activities based on Moodle is feasible.

2.2 Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework is the relational structure, which supports related theories used for the research study. This framework has four key components: "Courseware", "Resources", "Writing Process", and "Writing Activities" (Figure 1).
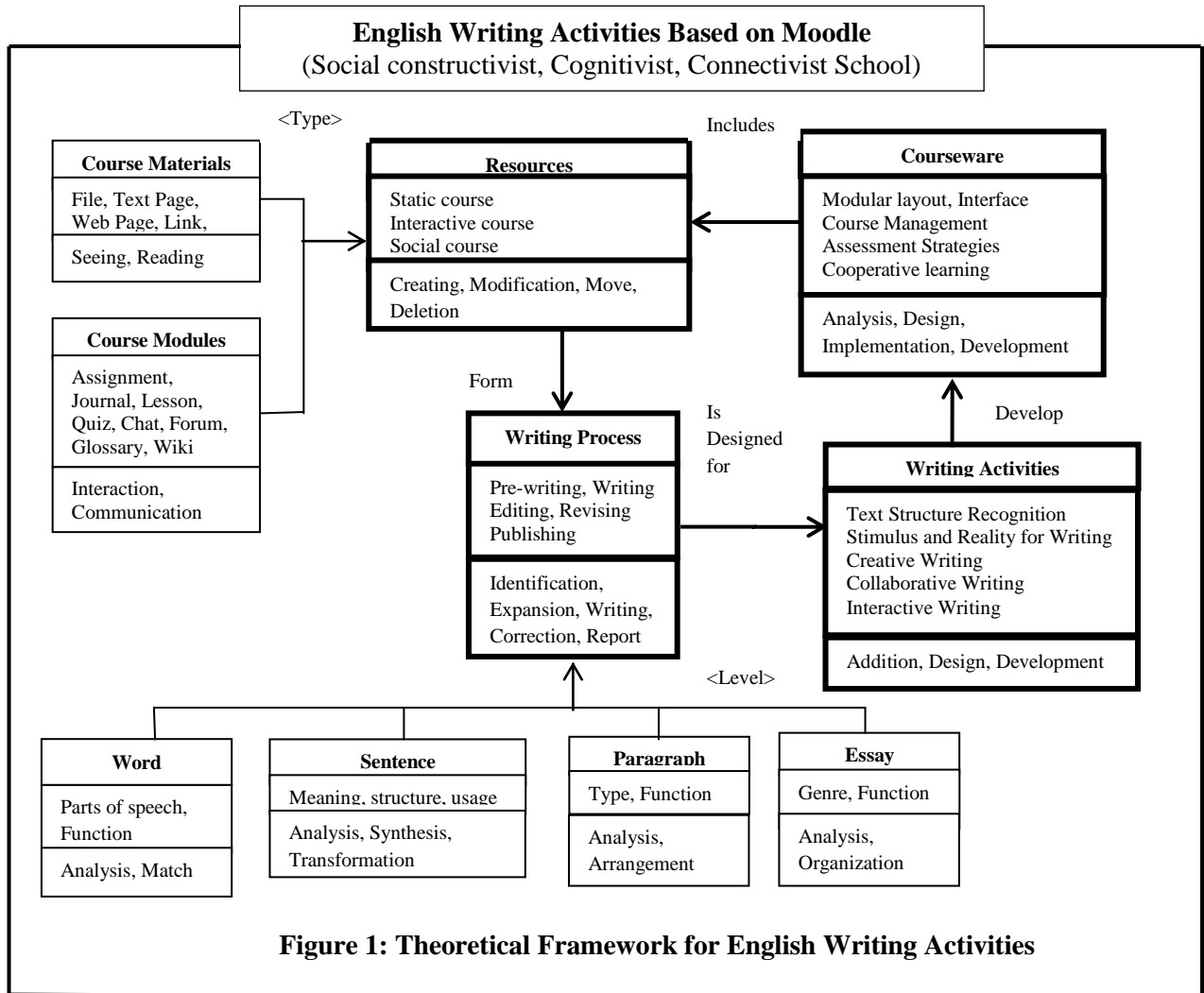

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for English Writing Activities

From the "Courseware", "Resources" are used to design "Writing Process", focusing on "Writing Activities". Noticeably, courses designed for "Writing Activities" can improve the "Courseware". This framework can be developed and expanded on other writing activities based on Moodle.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research design not only included what was done to complete the research project, but also ensured that data were collected to answer the research questions. This design included the type of the research approach, research sites, participants, the design and development of online writing courses based on Moodle, the data collection method, and the data gathering procedure.

3.1.1 The Type of the Study

The type of the study was Cross-sectional Survey Research used for asking participants different questions at a specific point of time.

3.1.2 Research Sites
Research Sites were Modern English Composition Classes at STU-ITPC and Instructional Technology Classes (DIP 7, DIP 8, TESOL 3) at HCMCOU.

3.1.3 Participants
Participants included 121 students and 183 teachers, trained in Moodle, were offered accounts and privileges of designed courses to practice and experience for a long time, and qualified for the investigation. Surveys were conducted from early April 2010 to late May 2011 in classrooms.

3.1.4 The Design and Development of Online Writing Courses Based on Moodle
The design and development of online writing courses based on Moodle included recognition of text structure using "Quiz", the provision of a stimulus and reality for writing using "Assignment", the performance of creative writing using "Blog", the practice of developing collaborative writing using "Wiki", and the rehearsal of interactive writing using the website programmed by an author of this article.

3.1.4.1 Recognizing Text Structure Using Quiz
This course consisted of two steps: identifying the text order and writing the essay. First, students recognized and showed the structure of the given essay and then wrote an essay with an assigned topic in a similar order. Consequently, this course was more favourable in terms of word processing, graphic enhancement, and format support.

3.1.4.2 Providing a Stimulus and Realistic Situation for Writing Using Assignment
This course provided students with a realistic setting to reply to an assigned topic. To perform this, students followed a series of activities: Choosing a Topic, Writing an Essay, and Checking Grammar and Plagiarism. As a result, this course provided a stimulus and realistic circumstance for writing and gave students full and detailed feedback on their writing papers.

3.1.4.3 Performing Creative Writing Using Blog
This course allowed students to write and respond to one another's writing. It included text, pictures, audio, video, and links while its content was appealing, stimulating, and controversial. Thus, this course supplied students with more multimedia, and strongly supported them in search for written blog contents and related reference materials.

3.1.4.4 Practicing Collaborative Writing Using Wiki
This course permitted students to work together on a single project. Indeed, students were assigned their own specific tasks of the plan but contributed to the success of the whole project. Owing to previewing writing papers of classmates, students could adjust to the content of their writing properly. Hence, this course enabled a community to fulfill a big and complicated plan.

3.1.4.5 Rehearsing Interactive Writing Using Website
Based on the website programmed by one of the authors, this course helped students practice online essay writing tutorial step by step. Besides, it permitted students to check the course content every day. Students also referenced online writing resources. Additionally, the forum was established for them to express their ideas for the course. Therefore, this course strengthened the interaction between users and the system.

Overall, all foregoing courses helped students practice writing activities diverse in genres and styles, which other writing environments could not supply.

3.1.5 Data Collection Method

The data collection method used was the questionnaire. There were two kinds of questionnaire: a questionnaire for students and a questionnaire for teachers. Each questionnaire included three issues: Individual Information, Moodle for Writing Courses, and Moodle Designed Modules. All questions were built in the form of closed questions. In terms of presentation, 34 questions were put on the left along with four or five options to the right of each one.

3.1.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering procedure refers to the order of data collection. It consists of four stages as following: First, the designer designed and developed online writing courses. Then, accounts were provided for participants to practice and experience online writing. After a long period of time, questionnaires were distributed and explained to participants to answer. Finally, data were collected and organized from questionnaires.

4. Findings and Discussions
4.1 Findings
4.1.1 Research Question 1:

To what extent does the use of Moodle facilitate teaching and learning writing?

The framework of data analysis is criteria for the evaluation of results. First, the assessment for mean was established as follows:

From 1.0 to 2.6: Low; from 2.7 to 3.3: Medium; and from 3.4 to 5.0: High

Second, the assessment for standard deviation (SD) was formulated as follows:

The lesser the SD, the higher the reliability of the investigation.

Therefore, as for students' and teachers' responses, because the values of mean were high, it was concluded that most of participants strongly agreed the use of Moodle facilitated teaching and learning writing.

4.1.2 Research Question 2:

How do students and teachers respond to Moodle modules designed for writing activities?

Because the values of mean were also high, it was shown that most of participants strongly agreed Moodle designed modules developed writing activities.

4.2. Discussions
4.2.1 Research Question 1:

To what extent does the use of Moodle facilitate teaching and learning writing?

In comparison with Al-Ajlan's and Zedan's (2008) research, this study showed consistently that Moodle was an optimal choice for university education and difference was typical rationales for the use of Moodle. Moreover, with Al-Ajlan's, Zedan's (2008), Ali's, and Jaafar's (2010) research, this study indicated that consistency was an effective feature of Moodle tools and technical aspects of the Moodle platform and that any difference lay in the learning contents of designed courses.

4.2.2 Research Question 2:

How do students and teachers respond to Moodle modules designed for writing activities?

In comparison with Lin et al.'s (2005) research, this study revealed consistency was different modules used to design for various writing activities and difference was types of Moodle designed modules for courses. Additionally, with Liao et al.'s (2011) research, this study confirmed consistency was the

effective use of Moodle modules for cooperative learning and difference was the instructional design plan for cooperative learning.

5. Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Moodle created a convenient environment for teaching and learning writing by providing support tools and management facilities; and Moodle designed modules were highly assessed, when producing a wide range of writing activities, focusing on recognition of text structure, the provision of a stimulus and reality for writing, and the practice of developing writing style creative, collaborative, and interactive.

5.2 Implications

First, to design high quality online writing courses, designers need to closely cooperate with instructors, and technicians and know how to effectively explore features of Moodle tools and technical aspects of the Moodle platform for integrating technology advances into designed courses. Second, the usefulness and ease of Moodle determines the acceptance and use of the Moodle e-learning system.

5.3 Limitations

This study was just concerned with survey research and did not examine other research studies. Additionally, it only investigated undergraduates' attitudes and did not consider those of students in colleges, foreign language centers, and vocational training schools.

5.4 Recommendations

- To confirm the results of this study, a similar study can be duplicated for other different universities and at different educational levels.
- To exploit resources for learning writing, students need to be equipped with online learning methods and computer literacy.
- To raise training performance, faculty members should participate in coaching courses on instructional technology and attend international conferences, seminars, and workshops.

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