

Moodle as a Course Management System

I. What is Moodle?

Moodle is a kind of Learning Management System (LMS), that is, a software package designed to help educators create online courses. It is now widely used as in universities, secondary and primary schools, other institutions, and homeschooling parents.

[Martin Dougiamas](#), a webmaster of a university and system administrator of WebCT installation, started to develop Moodle in order to solve some problems of WebCT in 2002. The original version was targeted for small classes or a case study, but gradually many features have been added by the developer and other contributors around the world. The Moodle company moodle.com has been providing managed hosting and consulting services since 2003. Currently Moodle sites amount to 2064 from 95 countries and 49 languages are offered.

II. The site that I visited is <http://moodle.org/>

The main function of this website is discussion forums that Moodle users share their knowledge and skills and collaborate, for example, about Moodle technical aspects and its applications. What are better, discussions are carried out in 18 languages. However, the discussions in the community forums are quite technical for novice users. The main menu in the right side shows lists of detailed descriptions that potential users need to read, such as free support, download, languages, moodle sites, etc. The main menu is as follows.



Fig. 1 Main page

Free support – Basic information about Moodle are provided.

Download – The latest version of Moodle can be downloaded from 10 hosts from some countries. No charge. The number of today's download (an average of more than 400 download a day) is a sign of the increasing use of Moodle. The size is 10591 kb in zip format. When I tried to download it, I encountered some exception problem that did not allow downloading on a public computer. Besides, the instructions for downloading for Windows are scattered with technical glossaries. For example, the second capture below shows the requirements for the installation, which are web serve software, PHP script language, and a working database server.



Fig 2. Download for windows

(Click for a large screen.)

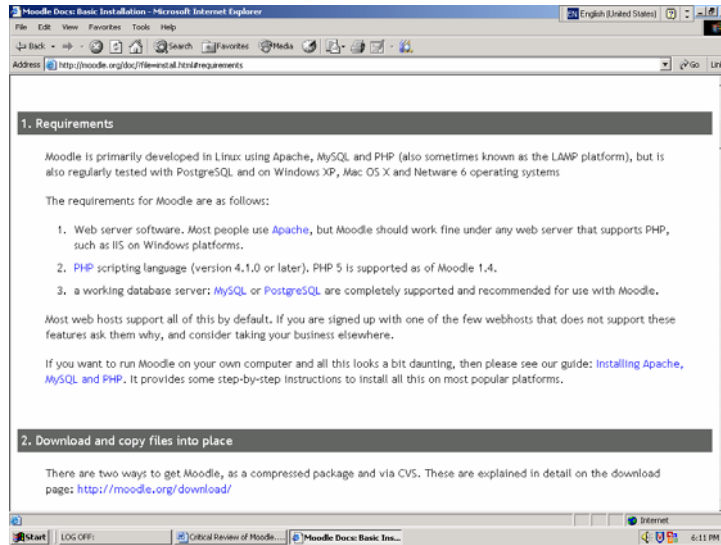


Fig. 3. Requirement

Languages – 46 language packs are provided in a zip format.

Moodle modules and add-ons

There are 23 activity modules; assignment, attendance, appointment, book, chat, choice, dialogue, exercise, forum, hotpot, glossary, journal, label, lesson, questionnaire, quiz, resource, scheduler, scorm, survey, wiki, webwork and workshop. The modules can be selectively downloaded and integrated into a Moodle site depending on the objectives and needs of the users. Here are the most distinctive and attractive features for language teaching and learning in a way that communications are facilitated and exercise activities are employed. Teachers and instructors have no need to install separate software programs and link to their websites. However, some complicating problems remain as to how to download and use the modules appropriately, though the Moodle site advertises that the applications are simple and easy. Once the mastery of the activity modules is

done, teachers will have an advantage of promoting interaction and communication.

Documentation – General information is provided about the history and philosophy of the development and the installation problems as well as teacher’s manual.

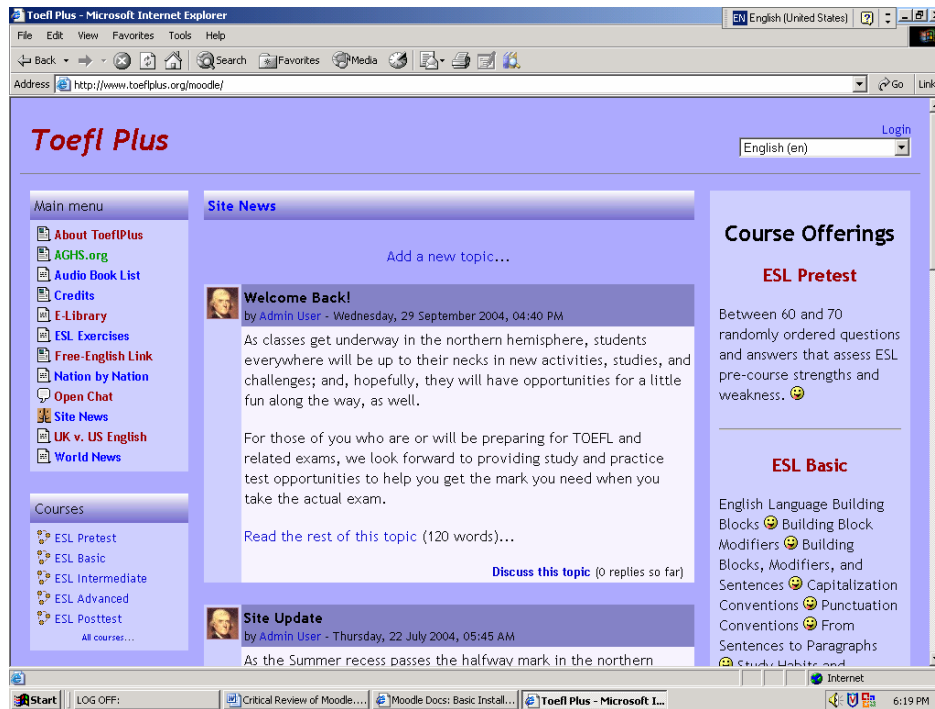
Moodle buzz – a collection of articles concerning Moodle.

A sub-community is designed for language teaching, especially concerning lessons and teaching strategies and four language skills. Participants post questions and answer them, some of which attract many replies, such as Media player, new quiz module, microphone, etc. It seems that they are interested in creating interactive activities using sound files.



Fig 4. Moodle for language teaching

III. A Moodle site for language teaching - <http://www.toeflplus.org/moodle/>



IV. The merits that are advertised from the Moodle site.

- Promotes a social constructionist pedagogy (collaboration, activities, critical reflection, etc)
- Suitable for 100% online classes as well as supplementing face-to-face learning
- Simple, lightweight, efficient, compatible, low-tech browser interface
- Easy to install on almost any platform that supports PHP. Requires only one database (and can share it).
- Full database abstraction supports all major brands of database (except for initial table definition)
- Course listing shows descriptions for every course on the server, including accessibility to guests.
- Courses can be categorised and searched - one Moodle site can support thousands of courses
- Emphasis on strong security throughout. Forms are all checked, data validated, cookies encrypted etc.

Most text entry areas (resources, forum postings, journal entries etc) can be edited using an embedded WYSIWYG HTML editor

V. The good points and bad points that I can think of.

<Good Points>

- It is open-source software, free to download, modify and even distribute it.
- The activity modules are selectively used to meet the objectives of the course. For example, Blog and Wiki packages can be downloaded and used in a language course without visiting other sites.
- On the part of teachers, it is easy to manage courses, for example, by using assignment and survey modules.
- On the part of students, the Moodle site is not only a source of materials and exercises but also a space of interaction, for example, using Chat, Dialogue and Discussion.

<Bad Points>

- It looks difficult for novice technicians to install and use the Moodle, because there are so many technical glossaries in the community forums and installation instructions. They might feel overwhelmed and give up trying. In order to be user-friendly and to be widely used, the easier version of Moodle is needed.

- It seems that on the surface most Moodle sites are quiet, not drawing much participation and many activity modules. Probably it is partly due to the high demand of Moodle users in terms of technical application and use. Therefore, no matter how many benefits an innovative tool has, it will be of no use if it is too demanding in any way.
- More detailed descriptions and examples of activity modules are needed to demonstrate how they are used. So, potential users can choose appropriate modules for their courses.

VI. Final comments

The Moodle looks very beneficial for language teaching and learning, because the interactive tools, such as Wiki, Discussion forums, and quiz, can be selectively employed to meet the objectives of the course and to motivate students. Though it is beyond my capability, it will be worth investing my time and effort to figure out this new tool.