

Using a Modular Approach to schMOOze with ESL/EFL Students

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Introduction

Reviewing a recent discussion thread at NETEACH-L (2001), it becomes obvious that text-only MOO (Multi-user domain Object Oriented) technology is still being used to facilitate ESL/EFL, despite its lack of multi-media bells and whistles. Personally, I find this continued interest in text-only MOO encouraging. To the best of my knowledge, I was the first of a small group of ESL/EFL teachers to complete a doctoral dissertation about using the MOO environment for language acquisition.

Briefly stated, a MOO site offers the synchronous communication of chat within the framework of a virtual world. Conceptually, entering a MOO site is very much like opening the pages of a novel, stepping into the book, and becoming one of the characters. Linguistically, students textually communicate with people from around the real world, mentally process the textual typography of the virtual world, and produce written output in order to manipulate objects in that virtual world.

Perhaps the reason non-graphics, or minimum-graphics, MOO sites are still being used by language teachers is that if "a picture is worth a thousand words", then those thousand words are never processed in the target language by the students. Beyond this common sense reason, Sanchez (1996a, 1996b) and Backer (1999) review the solid theoretical base for using MOO sites in foreign language teaching.

Returning to the NETEACH-L discussions, it is also obvious that many teachers who are considering using this technology are not sure about the most efficient ways of using it (NETEACH-L, 2001). In response to this uncertainty, the current article proposes a modular approach for using schMOOze University, the premier MOO site for ESL/EFL, which is found at:

telnet://schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu:8888

or at:

<http://schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu>

I have been involved with schMOOze for four and a half years and have been using it with my own students for most of this period. I also used schMOOze as the experimental MOO site for my dissertation. While experimenting with schMOOze, I developed this modular strategy, which I recommend to ESL/EFL teachers considering using this site with their students.

Possible Limitations in Using a MOO Site

A modular approach is necessary because of the various types of limitations that teachers face when considering MOO for ESL/EFL instruction. The major limitation is access to Internet computers during class time. Many teachers, finding their schools' Internet labs not easily available, might feel that scheduling MOO sessions "every once in a while" is better than not using MOO at all. However, this is definitely **not** the recommended way to use MOO. Research suggests that a MOO project should be planned as a compact educational experience, to be completed in a short, but intensive, period of time. Infrequent visits, on the other hand, will lead to student frustration due to the non-intuitive line commands that must be recalled, or relearned, during each visit (Backer, 1999).

The second limitation is the amount of time that is necessary for students to reach various levels of functionality in a MOO site. There is a hierarchy of users in any MOO site: guest, registered player, room owner, builder, programmer, wizard, and finally MOO-site

owner. It takes increasingly larger amounts of time to progress up the hierarchy, and time is usually a scarce resource for ESL/EFL teachers.

A third limitation is the lack of desire of many of the students to reach higher levels of functionality in the MOO site. Non-technically minded students will find learning the basic line commands hard enough, but at least these commands will give them the ability to communicate with people from all over the world and to navigate the MOO site. When demanding more than that, teachers should not be surprised if some students rebel against the technical demands of becoming anything beyond a room owner.

Although these limitations should be recognized and considered, they do not have to thwart teachers who want to use MOO technology and who can organize the minimum access, as defined below, to an internet lab. After recognizing the limitations, teachers can proceed, deciding which of the following modules fits their classes.

Module One: Guests at SchMOOze (Two sessions, preferably two academic hours each, within a week of each other)

If the relative lack of time in the Internet lab is the major limitation, visits to schMOOze as guests are still potentially rewarding. Guests can meet people from all over the world and learn about those people's life style. Even if there are no other people at schMOOze when students log on, there are things to do that will entail the meaningful use of English.

Yet even at this basic level of using a MOO site, teachers should prepare themselves and the class for the experience before actually going to the Internet lab. Without this preparation there will be confusion and frustration about what is happening during the MOO session.

The concept of MOO can be first introduced to the class as a reading comprehension exercise. One of the many position papers found on the Internet about MOO sites can be adapted to the class's linguistic level. This offline introduction provides a first step in integrating class-based learning with online activities, which, according to Warschauer (1996b), is an important prerequisite for the success of online learning experiences. In specific, this first introduction should mention the concept of netiquette and cover the basic commands the students will need:

- connect guest
- say <message>
- page <player name><message>
- @who
- look <here, player name, object name>
- north, south, east, west
- @join <player name>

Teachers should prepare a set of simple orientation tasks for the class's first visit to schMOOze. A typical list might be:

- Order and eat something the Student Union Cafeteria. Write what you got.
- Go swimming in the pool in the Student Union. Did you change your clothes?
- Write your choice of the best picture in the Administration Building Art Gallery.
- Record two "pearls of wisdom" from the fountain in the Central Mall.
- Take a bath in the bathroom in Dorm room 619. Write what the poster says.
- Order and drink something from MOOrrey's Bar. Write what you drank.

If teachers take classes to schMOOze for a first visit without such a list, the students will probably congregate at the "Entrance Gates" of the campus and will tend to talk only among themselves (Pinto, 1996). As a result, the screen will fill up with text so quickly that they will have trouble following the conversations. Furthermore, by not moving around the MOO site, they will miss the potentially rich experience of the virtual world. Teachers should be ready for this problem and should encourage the students to proceed with their tasks.

To avoid the students bunching up in the same location inside the campus, teachers should distribute different versions of the activities list, changing the order in each version. This will send small groups of students in different directions, allowing them to interact with the

MOO site more easily, and hopefully meet players from outside their class more easily. The students' paths will criss-cross during the MOO session and they can share, online, their experiences when they meet. They should also be encouraged to "page" each other for help.

Teachers should urge students to check the textual information in each location frequently. In particular, students entering a location should look for other people already there. If someone enters or leaves a location, it will appear in the text, in which case the students in that location will have to decide whether to "say" or "page" their message. With all the moving around the virtual world, students may become separated from their discussion partners. In this case, they can @join them or "page" them.

Of course, meeting players from outside the class is even more important than the orientation exercise. This is real communication with real people, usually from other cultures. Nevertheless, meeting new acquaintances can be within the fantasy framework of exploring the MOO site. Students from different countries can explore schMOOze together while getting to know each other.

Note that the list of orientation tasks requires the students to respond to their activities in writing, but it could be done orally, back in the classroom. As Ur (1981) points out, students tend to focus on activities better when there are clear tasks to complete. Here there are two levels in the task: doing something online and reporting about it offline. This is particularly important for understanding the "pearls of wisdom", which are idioms and folk sayings that need explanation. Once again, online activities are being integrated with classroom learning.

A subsequent visit by guests can be used to explore the various exhibitions in the Culture Center, in the northwest corner of the campus. Not only will this increase the students' MOOing skills, it will provide for cross-cultural experiences that can be reviewed in the classroom. One particularly extensive exhibition is the virtual kibbutz, in the Israel section. It can be assumed that exploring a communal settlement will present much to talk about in class.

Once again, the students' explorations should be guided by a list of tasks. Hopefully the students will become interested in exploring more of the virtual kibbutz or will be able meet other people during this visit. Some typical tasks are:

- Write what the boy in the dairy offered you.
- Write why the music in the volunteers' disco was so bad.
- Write who was in the gym and what was that person doing.
- Eat some falafel and drink some wine. How will you remember what you ate?
- Describe the postman.
- Write what you saw in the guard house.

As with the first list of tasks, the students should receive different versions of the second list, sending them in different directions.

On the same page as the second list, teachers can include information about "emoting". This is a basic MOO function that was not absolutely necessary for the first visit. During this second visit the students can learn how to present visual activities on the computer screen by using a colon and the third person singular of the present tense. For example, if Jose types:

`:takes out a sandwich and eats it.`

then everyone in that location, including Jose, sees:

Jose takes out a sandwich and eats it.

ESL/EFL teachers should appreciate the potential of enjoyable practice of the third-person singular present tense, a grammatical structure that causes so many problems for our students. In addition, emoting can be used for other tenses as well.

Of course, the MOO program doesn't correct grammar, so students' mistakes will appear on the screen. It is the job of the teachers to catch the mistakes, when possible, and encourage proper usage.

Many MOO clients (the programs that facilitate using telnet-based MOOs) can keep logs of a MOO session. Teachers may want to use these logs during teacher-student conferences. Some of the many issues these conferences could deal with are:

- concentrating on specific grammar points

- analyzing where negotiation of meaning broke down and how it was fixed, or how to fix similar break-downs in future conversations
- using discourse markers
- forming questions
- using colloquial expressions
- expressing opinions
- persuading someone to do something

Module Two: Registered Players and Room Owners at SchMOOze (Two or three sessions, preferably two academic hours each, over a period of two weeks)

If teachers have more time to devote to MOOing, it would make sense to have the students register and get rooms. This strengthens the students' cyber-presence, allowing other players to recognize them and relate to them in an on-going way (Turkle, 1995). Moreover, it increases the students' feeling of ownership over their learning experience.

Registration requires each student sending an e-mail message to "Mehi" at:

`jfalsett@shiva.hunter.cuny.edu`

In the message the student should request a character at schMOOze and suggest a few character names, one of which will be assigned, along with a password. The character names should be short. It can be assumed that people with longer names, which require more work to type, will get fewer invitations to talk than people with shorter names.

In order to get a room at the dorm in schMOOze, the registered players have to give themselves visual descriptions, in correct English, that other players can "look at". These descriptions can portray the students' real life appearance and personality, or can be a fantasy-based person or thing. The two commands needed are:

`@describe me as <your character description>`

and

`@gender <male or female>`

Things that require a neuter gender do not need the `@gender` command.

When ready to be "looked at", students send a MOOmail (e-mail that exists only within the MOO site) to Gregor, requesting a room at the Dorm. In general, MOOmail looks like this:

```
@send <receiver's character name>
<Subject, in response to the computer's prompt>
SAY <1st line of message>
.
.
SAY <last line of message>
send
```

MOOmail tends to be problematic for beginners. Please note that each line within the message must start with the word "say". Another problem is remembering that the last line does not have a `@` before the word "send". Beyond these technical problems, students new to MOO often become confused about using this asynchronous tool in a synchronous environment. They expect immediate answers, something which will not happen unless the recipient happens to be on line. Obviously, the teacher should become proficient with MOOmail before asking the class to use it.

When given rooms in the dorm, students "walk" to their rooms and make them their "home" by using the `@sethome` command. In the

future, when the students connect to schMOOze, they will find themselves automatically in their own rooms. Also, they will be able to teleport to their rooms (i.e., "Beam me up, Scotty!"), at any time, by typing the command "home".

Students can create whatever environment they wish in their rooms, using the command:

@describe here as <description of room>

Of course, the students have to be in their rooms for "here" to make sense.

The students may want to match the theme of their character descriptions with the descriptions of their rooms. For example, a student who describes herself as an ace-mechanic may want to describe her room as a well stocked service garage. Allowing themselves to participate in a little bit of fantasy, the students will create interesting identities and environments of their own choice. The students should then be encouraged to invite other players to inspect and comment on their descriptions. Teachers searching for constructivist activities in foreign language will appreciate this process (Hall, 1998). As Turkle (1995, 1998) suggests, students write meaningful texts, for a real audience, and then identify with the characters and environments they have constructed. This will probably increase the sense of student ownership over their own learning processes.

Unlike scheduling visits for student guests, the time needed to turn a group of guests into registered characters and then into room owners is harder to estimate. Registration should take a day or two, but producing acceptable character descriptions and corresponding via MOOmail may take days, if not weeks, depending on the frequency of students visits to the Internet lab.

Although developing a character in schMOOze is meant to be fun, it is still a serious part of the learning process. Students should know that they will be graded on a minimal level of performance (e.g., describing their characters and rooms). Beyond this minimal level, teachers should encourage students to spend free time at the MOO site by giving extra credit for reports about meeting other characters and about exploring the virtual world.

Module Three: Online Classrooms at SchMOOze (One session as an experiment, preferably two academic hours, more sessions if desired)

Both experienced guests and registered players can participate in MOO-based classes in schMOOze. In the Conference Center, in the South East corner of the campus, there are conference halls that simultaneously facilitate small group work and large group interaction. A small group can sit at a table and discuss a topic, without disturbing other groups. At any time, teachers can request full-class interaction. By "standing up", or by "speaking up", students can present the group's work to the whole class. By writing on the virtual blackboard, the students present information that can be accessed, at will, by any of the participants.

The members of a virtual class at schMOOze can be sitting in the same real-life computer room, in different computer rooms in the same real-life school, or can be participating from different schools, perhaps in different countries. The important thing is that they are meeting in cyberspace, constructing meaning together through communication in English.

The work of each group can be "logged" (i.e., recorded in a text file), as can the work of the entire class. Using these logs, the teachers and students can review the language they produced and the content matter they dealt with. These logs can later be used for in-class discussions, for writing activities, or for individual teacher-student conferences.

A variation of this module is using MOO for collaborative work. Small groups, consisting of students from different schools, can meet online and work on joint projects. When time for synchronous communication runs out, information can be transferred by MOOmail, by leaving messages on virtual black boards, or by regular e-mail. Of course, collaborative MOO projects succeed only if the distant teachers can get their classes to the Internet labs at the same time, which is no small feat!

The obvious question is why go through all the trouble of doing group work, full class lessons, or collaborative projects at a MOO site? Why not just have these interactions and creative processes in the traditional, real-life classroom? Research done by Beauvois (1992, 1994/5), Kelm (1992), and Kern (1995) indicated greater student motivation, greater participation by most of the students, and less anxiety while using synchronous computer mediated communications. Kern (1995) suggested that the use of pseudonyms decreases anxiety among many of the students. Using the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator, Beauvois and Eledge (1996) found that synchronous computer mediated communications aided both introvert and extrovert students. Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts

(1996) reviewed recent qualitative and quantitative computer mediated communications research and reported findings of greater student autonomy, greater equality in the classroom, a movement from teacher-centered to student-centered learning activities, and improved learning skills (assuming a properly organized computer mediated communications environment). Kern (1995) and Warschauer (1996a) found that students produce more target language output in computer mediated communications environments as opposed to oral discussions in regular classes. Warschauer (1996b) noted the favorable attitudes (i.e., less anxiety and more motivation) of both ESL and EFL students towards using computer mediated communications as an instructional procedure, regardless of gender and keyboard skills. Together, these research findings offer a strong reason for teachers to hold online classes at schMOOze.

Module Four: Group Building at SchMOOze (One classroom period; writing done off line, perhaps as homework; one online session to examine the results)

The entire class, or subgroups within the class, can decide on places or objects that they want to create in the MOO site. Once again, the online linguistic experiences will merge with classroom learning. The first stage is brainstorming for the places and objects to be created. The second stage is the writing process involved in producing descriptions and "messages" (i.e., what appears on the screen when an object is manipulated). The writing process can also include peer editing to emphasize writing for a real audience, to allow the students to find their own problems and solutions, and to cut down the work load for the teacher. The third stage is having the "builders" (usually the teachers, but perhaps some more advanced student MOOers) actually create the places and objects and then copy-and-paste the descriptions and messages onto the new creations. The fourth stage is bringing the class to schMOOze to inspect their collective creations.

There are many advantages to this four-stage module. Meaningful communication is created in the classroom when organizing the project. Then students write for a real, world-wide audience. In addition, by seeing their own creations within the MOO site, the students have a greater sense of ownership over the constantly changing MOO site and a greater sense of ownership over their own learning experiences. This is truly a constructivist experience, at the group level.

Obviously, there must be at least one builder in the class. To become a builder requires a much greater investment of time and energy than merely describing a room. The future builder has to learn about "messages" and how to set them. To do so, there is a great deal of reading required, either from the MOO help texts or from online interactions with more experienced MOOers who are at the MOO site. If students are motivated to become builders, they will be processing a large amount of meaningful English. Nevertheless, given the limitations of time, often it is the teacher who becomes the builder for the class project.

Module Five: Individual Builders at SchMOOze (Many sessions devoted to achieving the rank of builder and additional sessions to construct and present the creations)

In this module the constructivist process is at the individual level. Although this is a theoretically more pleasing situation (Hall, 1998), it requires very large allocations of time, both for the class and even more for the teachers. Teachers must become builders themselves to be able to guide their students through the process of reaching that rank in the MOO hierarchy. Beyond that, teachers will have to offer a great deal of individual or small group tutoring. Unfortunately, because class time is such a scarce resource, most teachers will choose not to use this module.

Those teachers who do urge their students to become builders should not be discouraged if only a small number of students respond enthusiastically. This is normal. Nevertheless, teachers can add incentives, like extra credit, for students who achieve the rank of builder and construct their own creations. This extra credit is an overt reward for processing large amounts of English and extracting meaning from their reading.

Conclusions

Despite the lack of multi-media whistles-and-bells, MOO technology can offer an enjoyable experience in second language acquisition. In fact, because MOO has few graphic distractions, learners must concentrate on text, which keeps them focused on linguistic content and form, rather than non-linguistic elements of technology. Beyond this, the use of MOO in ESL/EFL has a strong theoretical justification, based on communicative and constructivist approaches.

This article has presented a modular approach for using schMOOze University to facilitate ESL/EFL. To profit from MOO technology in the most efficient way, teachers must choose the proper mix of modules based on the limitations of their teaching realities. Problems of access to the Internet lab, other limitations of time, and limitations of motivation must be taken into account. After considering these limitations, teachers can choose to use schMOOze for interpersonal communications, exploration of a virtual world, teaching online classes, fostering membership in the virtual world, group constructivist activities, individual constructivist activities, or any combination of the above.

Nevertheless, the most important factor for the successful use any of the modules is the preparation of the teachers themselves. Without experiencing the very special learning environment offered at a MOO site, the teachers cannot possibly create an effective learning experience for their classes. It is imperative that teachers master each module before having the students proceed.

Visit schMOOze

<http://schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu:8888/>

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