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Learning through MOOing

Dr. Sarah Merrouche*

Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Oum El Bouaghi University, BP 358, Oum El Bouaghi 04000, Algeria

Abstract

Though many schools and universities are today connected to the Internet, its technologies are still not adequately integrated into classroom teaching and learning. Many teachers think in rather restricted ways about using online tools and resources in their profession. This paper attempts to shed light on the MOO (Multi-User Domain – Object Oriented) technology, which provides a flexible and rich virtual environment for synchronous communication. Focus is laid on the Da-MOO, or the Educational MOO, and the way it lends itself to collaborative learning, particularly tandem learning, to support teaching in the language classroom. A practical experience with “The Palace” is described. Algerian EFL students find it appealing, motivating and useful.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, there is an increasing emphasis on the use of technology in all areas of education particularly foreign language learning/teaching. The advent of the Internet has breathed new life into visions of a bright future for foreign language pedagogy. A wide range of possibilities are offered: accessing information through virtual libraries, electronic databases and search engines; publishing on the web; and computer-mediated communicating. The latter can take several forms: e-mail, chat, listserv (or discussion list), message boards (or web-based bulletin boards) and MUVes (or Multi-User Virtual Environments).

MUVes are two- or three- dimensional, text-based virtual spaces. Their design gives the user a sense of being present with geographically distant people in the same place. A ‘room’ metaphor is used in the sense that participants are immersed in a virtual space of rooms through which they can navigate by issuing simple commands. MUVes are flexible in that they allow multiple users to log in simultaneously to communicate both synchronously and asynchronously. This work spotlights MOO as a technology tool that has great potential for creating an active, learner-centred and motivating learning environment. This is practically substantiated through the MOOing experience of Oum El Bouaghi University EFL students.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +213 773206887; fax: +213 032424212.
E-mail address: sarahserarma@yahoo.com.

2. MOO, chat and MUD

MOO stands for “Multi-User Domain Object-Oriented”. It is a technology which enables its users not only to chat or to interact with other users, but also to manipulate objects. Users have access to shared rooms and other objects including furniture, teaching tools, or even food or beverages. They can virtually move from room to room, change objects or create new ones, and communicate with native and non-native speakers of the target language in synchronous time. As such, they are given a special sense of space and proximity, making their interactions seem very real notwithstanding the lack of aural information.

Technically speaking, MOO is simply a database hosted by a server which enables the exchange of written messages in real time. This exchange takes place in a virtual environment with textual descriptions of objects, such as rooms and artifacts, created and stored in the same database. Simple commands allow participants to discover who else is currently logged in, to name and to describe themselves, to communicate with others, and to write text conveying non-linguistic clues related to emotions, gestures and facial expressions.

MOO is often mistakenly considered to be a mere form of chat. Chat is real-time communication between two or more people through the Internet. As a matter of fact, MOO differs from plain text chat in that it has a broader scope: it allows users to create discourse with or without reference to real time; it also permits them to build, redesign, and expand their virtual environment, renewing constantly the MOO architecture. When there is nobody in the chat room, there is nothing to do there, but if users find MOO with nobody connected, there are still plenty of things to do: They can wander from room to room reading descriptions, doing language learning activities including puzzles, quizzes and games, and creating their own cyber objects or games. Most importantly perhaps, the contextual richness of MOO makes its users feel as if they actually meet in the same place. Furthermore, MOO rooms are permanent unlike chat rooms which are animated only by the online presence of users. Some MOOs provide users with maps to help them navigate MOO space. The newest generation of MOOs enables users to import Web pages and other graphics and send them to other MOO users with few clicks of the mouse.

MOO is also often related to MUD. The latter is a popular game-type programme in which hundreds of players may be involved all at the same time. They perform different tasks such as exterminating dragons in a maze of dungeons in order to find a treasure. While playing, they can move through virtual rooms and interact with each other. Will Crowther and Don Woods were the first to introduce a computer version of the game in the 1960s. In the 1970s, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle from the University of Essex designed a networked version which they called Multi-User Dungeons, or MUD, now known as MUD1 (Mills, 2006). MUDs have different components: players, rooms, exits and objects. The players are the users themselves; they introduce themselves as characters with specific traits and possessions. Rooms provide the virtual space in which the players interact. Exits are links between rooms; they provide the way for the players to move from one room to another. Objects can also be moved through rooms; they can be animals, swords, or any other thing relevant to the theme of the game.

Today, MUD is no longer a simple game, but a text-based virtual world for chatting or “talking in writing” (Merchant, 2005:141). The acronym is now used to mean Multi-User Dimension or Domain. In 1989, a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University, named James Aspens, wanted to see what would happen if monsters, magic swords and all game features were removed from MUD. His new version which he called “Tiny MUD” became less like a game and more like a community or a gathering of people who enjoyed virtual company. Users have graphic representations known as avatars, through which they explore the virtual world, communicate with each other, and even create their own virtual items and rooms. The ‘wizards’ or the administrators, i.e., those who originally created the virtual world, specify its use and purpose. Eventually, MUD became a programme that could serve scientific forums, educational environments, socio-cultural communities and other purposes. In the 1990s, MUDs became known as MOOs. Today, the educational MOO is viewed as a valuable learning milieu and is popular among teachers and learners.

3. The educational MOO

The educational MOO (known as the Da-MOO) offers a range of courses in a virtual classroom where the main characters are the teacher and the learners, but the learning process is not based on the traditional transmission model. The role of the teacher here is different from his role in an “ordinary” class in that s/he does not stand in front of the learners, and becomes just another participant in the MOO classroom. In MOO seminar rooms, students

can see each other's comments scrolling across the screen. If the instructor wants to view what students are doing, or wants to record the session for the students to take home, s/he can turn on a virtual recorder that captures the discussion, which can then be sent to students' e-mail accounts, or stored in the Da-MOO for later retrieval. Transcripts of conversations can be exploited in several ways: they can be viewed by non-participants; they can be re-viewed by participants to recall important points of a discussion; they can also be used by the teacher to evaluate students' participation.

There are other characters, namely, the guest, the character, the builders and the archwizard. The first visit by any user to a MOO is as a guest; this temporary status allows one a first experience with a MOO without committing oneself to it. Guests have the ability to talk and send messages across the MOO, to use MOOmail and to move around in the MOO space. They cannot, however, make any permanent change in their guest character. They may be allowed to create objects which will be recycled as soon as they log off. The characters, on the other hand, are permanent with password access. They can name themselves and set their gender. Builders are users capable of creating rooms, exits, and objects that are consistent with the MOO theme. They can also write customized durable messages which automatically appear when certain commands are used. The archwizard is the one who founded the MOO, the system operator, the director or the ultimate decision-maker.

With MOO's increasing importance, some universities have established their own MOO systems to teach foreign languages to their students, for example, SchMOOze University² (for English learners), Mundo Hispano³ (for Spanish learners), and le MOO Français⁴ (for French learners) (Loannou-Georgiou, 2005). SchMOOze University is the first networked virtual space for ESL / EFL teachers and students. It offers a variety of means such as courses, games, an online dictionary and chat rooms to learn English in a rich and friendly environment. Another important university MOO is Diversity University⁵. It provides full-credit courses and holds regular international conferences online. MOOSE Crossing⁶ is an educational MOO dedicated to children aged 13 and under. Children from all around the world can meet, interact, develop their writing skills, create virtual objects (such as a Pokémon), and even build virtual rooms and cities. Notwithstanding the availability of these virtual spaces devoted to language learning and intercultural exchange, few teachers and researchers have worked with language learners in the MOO environment (Shield, 2003). Thus, MOO-use best practice is yet to be brought to light.

4. MOO as a learning tool

MOO is a powerful and flexible tool for learning and teaching that can be adapted to suit different learners and pedagogical purposes. Unlike a four-walled classroom, MOO offers an equal chance for every learner to contribute to online discussions. It may be particularly liberating for shy or introvert learners. In MOO-related literature, it is reported that individuals who might otherwise hesitate to ask questions or take part in debates in physical classroom settings are likely to become more active in a MOO class. Through the MOO technology, they not only have the possibility to follow an ongoing text-based discussion before they decide to get involved, but can also take their time to reflect and then to compose a message. If they choose not to participate in a MOO conversation, they can leave a MOO-mail for friends. Besides, they can resort to a nickname, or "even adopt a different personality from... (their) 'real-life' persona" (Shield et al.: 2005:180). The lack of visual information about themselves adds to their ease and comfort; they tend to forget their anxiety, take risks in their use of the foreign language and experiment without losing face. This relaxing atmosphere is conducive to effective learning; it is not necessarily available in a face-to-face setting.

Given that communication in MOO takes place via text, it is assumed that only written language can be practised, and that this technology tool befits the development of writing skills. The exact nature of synchronous chat is still a debatable issue, however. According to some researchers in the field, this language is neither spoken nor written, but a hybrid of the two (Crystal, 2001). What matters is that MOO enables learners to practise their language skills in a way which reflects real life communication. While MOO entails continuous and active

² <http://schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu>

³ www.umsl.edu/~moosproj/mundo.html

⁴ www.umsl.edu/~moosproj/moofrancais.html

⁵ <http://moo.du.org/>

⁶ <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/elc/moose-crossing/>

composing, it also engages learners in multi- threaded discussions which usually involve the use of a number of skills and strategies in real time. For example, requests of clarification or elaboration are common during MOO discussions. They entail continuous drafting and re-drafting of text until participants are satisfied with the result. Following this line of thought, Shield et al. (2000) identified metacognitive and cognitive language learning strategies related to MOO use. They put it clearly that in-MOO activities can be ‘logged’ or recorded as text files or Web pages, a fact which makes it possible for learners to access the logs at any time to reflect on their content in terms of grammatical structures, vocabulary items, discourse devices, , conversational strategies, and cultural import. Doubtless, this can be a powerful means to foster language learning.

Accordingly, MOO applications provide learners with the opportunity to work in a self-directed way, and hence to take responsibility for their own learning. Drawing on their experiences with this technology tool, Von der Emde et al. (2001) argue that MOO is a learner-centred environment which values autonomous and individualized learning, peer teaching, rich content-based instruction and the play pedagogy. In fact, working with a Da-MOO inevitably shifts responsibility for the direction of the course from teacher to learners. In MOO group works, students largely control the flow of discussions. At the same time, everyone of them is able to write and to speak at the level s/he is capable of while still collaborating with others. This community-based structure automatically leads to peer teaching, for participants receive feedback and thus learn from each other. Moreover, MOO is by definition a rich virtual milieu which lends itself to content-based teaching, experimentation and play with the target language.

MOO world-wide availability allows teachers to hold virtual classes or to organize projects which bring together learners from different parts of the world. Accordingly, learners from different classrooms, schools, universities, and socio-cultural environments are able to interact, to discuss topics of interest, to share knowledge and skills and to solve problems jointly. This online collaboration is not only supportive and engaging, but it may also lead to the construction of complex knowledge and the development of effective social skills. Similarly, teachers at all levels have opportunities to collaborate by sharing experiences and exchanging resources. The immersive interaction made available through the MOO world is a significant experience for both learners and educators. The synchronous nature of MOO- based discourse enables one to ask a question or suggest an idea and receive an instant answer or feedback from a whole community of friends.

One of the most rewarding experiences of MOO is tandem learning. The latter denotes mutual support between the native speaker of a language and the learner of this language who, at the same time, is a native speaker of his / her partner’s target language. This learning approach has several advantages. Learners have another informant (besides their teacher) who can illustrate aspects of the target language, and who can provide written and/or spoken examples to assist with learning problems. Learners are also given the opportunity to acquire the target language through communication in an authentic context. In addition, partners are valuable informants about the culture of the target language community, and thus provide an amount of information that far exceeds the data which may be included in a language textbook. Because users are learners of a foreign language and teachers of their native language, they not only feel safe to make mistakes, but they also gain self-confidence in the knowledge that they have something to teach their partners.

Tandem learning has been practised since the 1960s by the Deutsch – Französisches Jugendwerk / Office Franco – Allemand pour la Jeunesse (Lewis, 2005). In the 1990s, it has become available to a great number of learners with the advent of the Internet. MOO provides an excellent virtual place where tandem learners can meet and collaborate both synchronously and asynchronously.

Foreign language teachers should support MOO tandem learning. They may help students to find ‘partners’ on the basis of such factors as age, level of proficiency and interests. They can assist them to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and set goals accordingly. Furthermore, they can guide them through appropriate learning activities, and help them manage their time and self-assess their progress. The opportunity to chat with native speakers and to learn from them is undoubtedly an incentive for learners to return again and again to MOOing. Each time they return, they reinforce what they have learned and are exposed to more input. As friendships are forged, users would have intrinsic reasons for using the foreign language.

5. A practical experience with “the Palace”

“The Palace” is a MOO which suggests many rooms of communication where teachers and learners can meet and discuss various topics together with native speakers of the target language. What is advantageous in this MOO

is the fact that it offers free installation and registration. Moreover, it is relatively simple, for there is no waiting for files to download when moving from one room to another. Users can include a photograph of themselves for others to see. Each one of them has an onscreen representation or an avatar. It may be a spherical, yellow, happy face, sometimes known as a roundhead. This shape can be changed by clicking on it.

The Welcome Palace Portal is the default entry point into the Palace. It is private in that it is restricted to only one user. It can be used to get acquainted with the basic layout of the Palace software user interface. The Welcome Palace Portal is a portal to various destinations: the Palace Directory, thePalace.com Home Page, Practice Palace or Palace in Wonderland, Mansion and other Palaces. The Palace software enables its users to visit all the Palace rooms, to send MOOmails, and “to talk” or to communicate with others. Communication takes place through text appearing in a cartoon-balloon near the speaker’s head. Users may communicate with each other (as English language learners), or with native speakers of English from different parts of the world. Conversations are life-like, and occur in life-like, two-dimensional, furnished rooms. Visitors can move inside a room by simply clicking with the computer mouse on any spot in it; the avatar moves to the spot in question. It is possible for them to remain lurking when unwilling to take part in a conversation, or when not allowed to.

In 2010, first year English learners at Oum El Bouaghi University (Algeria) were invited to take part in a MOOing experience in the Palace. They were initially introduced to MOO: What it is, how it operates and what it is used for. Those students who were interested and willing to participate in the MOO project were given clear instructions about the installation and registration procedures. They were asked to read the MOO Netiquette (or the Network Etiquette) before they log on. Most MOOs have codes of conduct which users must comply with. One rule of behaviour is, for instance, to be polite and courteous. Students were also asked to have an e-mail especially devoted to MOO (the MOOmail).

First MOO encounters were planned with few students for an effective feedback on the part of the teacher. Then, all students were invited to join in, and as a first MOO task, they were asked to describe their first impressions and feelings about the MOO world. In the subsequent weekly-organized online encounters, which lasted for two months, students performed various tasks: completing a language activity, discussing a topic, and interviewing other MOO users to find answers to pre-set questions. Learners were recommended to have a purpose each time they visited the Palace.

The outcomes of this MOOing experience were successful. Students got acquainted with MOO. They communicated with each other both synchronously and asynchronously via MOOmail. They enjoyed meeting with each other and with other users, and participated enthusiastically in discussions, whether or not the teacher was present. They apparently took advantage of the relatively anonymous environment of the Palace. They equally enjoyed moving through its rooms and building their own objects. They were encouraged to reflect on their MOO ‘adventures’ by writing a narrative after each MOO encounter. Some students revealed that practising English in real time in this new environment improved their communication and social skills. Others reported that conversing in MOO requires high-level key boarding skills; lacking typing speed, they, at times, found it difficult to keep up with an interaction. On the whole, MOOing was felt to be appealing, stimulating and beneficial. One of the students wrote: “This has been a wonderful experience to me: I have improved my English; I have improved my knowledge of the computer; I have made new friends; and I have had much fun.”

6. Conclusion

MOO began as a game, and then gained an educational value. Today, it offers foreign language learners the opportunity to practise the target language with native and non-native speakers in real-time conversations. Its potential for language learning has not been yet fully investigated. Nevertheless, there is growing research evidence which suggests that when used appropriately, MOO can be empowering to learners in that it does not only contribute to develop their linguistic and communicative abilities, but also their social interaction skills and critical thinking. That is why teachers and learners should capitalize on this valuable tool.

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