# **Are WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet Equally Effective in EFL Instruction?**

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#### **Abstract**

The study aimed to find out whether the complexity of an online course design would affect its frequency of usage, to identify technological and linguistic barriers to students' participation and interaction in those online courses and to report students' perceptions of their online learning experience. Female freshman students participating in this study were divided into three groups, each assigned to one of the online course management systems: WebCT, Nicenet, and Moodle. The students received the same in-class instruction, studied the same grammar textbook, covered the same grammatical structures, did the same exercises and took the same quizzes. The subjects had no prior experience using online teaching, although 40% have access to the internet, have an e-mail, can browse the internet and chat. The students accessed the online courses from home. Enrollment in each online course is optional. Students are given extra credit for participation. Results revealed that Nicenet was the most popular and actively used platform, with 183 posts in 4 weeks, compared to only 4 posts in Moodle and WebCT. The effective use of Nicenet was attributed to its ease of use, simple language, and supportive social atmosphere. In contrast, Moodle and WebCT faced challenges such as complex forum designs, cultural barriers, limited IT skills, and lack of internet access. The study concluded that while Nicenet was effective due to its user-friendly design and supportive environment, Moodle and WebCT were less successful due to various barriers. The findings highlight the importance of considering technological, linguistic, and cultural factors in the design and implementation of online courses for EFL instruction.

#### Introduction

Online instruction is not currently used at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, as we have no internet access and no PC's in the classrooms (Al-Jarf, 2004c; Al-Jarf, 2005a; Al-Jarf, 2005e; Al-Jarf, 2005f). I have been using online instruction in teaching EFL to Saudi students from home for 5 years. Nicenet, WebCT and Moodle were used to teach grammar to freshman students at KSU in Saudi Arabia.

An attempt was made to teach grammar to freshman students at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT) using WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet. The aims of the study were: (1) to find out whether the complexity of an online course design would affect its frequency of usage; (2) to identify the technological and linguistic barriers to students' participation and interaction; and (3) to report students' views of their online learning experience.

The impact of online instruction on EFL freshman students' grammar achievement was based on quantitative analyses of the pre and posttests. The effect of online instruction on freshman

students' attitudes was based on qualitative analyses of students' responses to a post-treatment questionnaire as well as the author's daily observations and notes.

#### **Literature Review**

A literature review showed some studies that compared the technical aspects, i.e., web course tools of some online courses. For example, Marshall University (1999) presented a chart comparison between Blackboard, Convene, Embanet, eCollege, Saratoga Group, Symposium, TopClass, WebCT, Web Course in A Box, and WebMentor. The chart compares the software costs, hardware requirements, technical support, developmental features, student tools, instructor tools, instructional features, administrator tools, and administrative features. In addition, Wisdom tools at the Center for Excellence and Indiana University (1997) presented a chart comparing e-Web, Internet Classroom Assistant, TopClass, Web Course in a Box, and WebCT. The chart compares overall tool features, creating a syllabus/course information, chat, conferencing, e-mail or personal messaging, administration (quizzes, tests, and grades), and then gives an overall rating.

However, the differential effects of different Online Course Management Systems on the teaching and learning EFL in general and learning grammar in particular was not investigated by prior studies.

### **Subjects**

150 female freshman students (3 groups) were enrolled in their first grammar course. They had no prior experience in online instruction. They were divided into three groups and were randomly assigned to WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet. They were studying the same textbook, covered the same grammatical topics and completed the same exercises in class.

#### **Grammatical Topics Covered**

- parts of speech,
- prepositions,
- prepositional phrases,
- Transitive, intransitive, linking verbs,
- regular and irregular verbs,
- adverb placement,
- information, tag, negative and yes-no questions,
- negatives,

- singular and plural,
- use of definite and indefinite articles,
- pronouns,
- subject-verb agreement,
- 9 tenses,
- modals,
- pronunciation of –ed, -s at the end of words,
- spelling of –ing, -ed, -es.

The subjects had no prior experience using online teaching, although 40% have access to the internet, have an e-mail, can browse the internet and chat. They used their own PC's and accessed the Internet from home, as the Internet was inaccessible from COLT. Enrollment in the online courses was optional since 45% of the students had Internet access at home. Students in the three groups were given extra credit for using the online courses.

#### **Procedures**

Before instruction, the three groups were pre-tested. Results showed no significant differences among them in their knowledge of English grammar.

The three groups were exposed to the same in-class instruction. They used the same grammar textbook, covered the same grammatical structures, completed the same exercise and took the same tests.

The three Online Course Management Systems were used as a supplement to in-class instruction: WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet.

Prior to online instruction, the students' computer literacy skills were assessed by a questionnaire (Al-Jarf, 2005a). A tutorial was given to them for reference. The online course tools were described and instructions on how to use a certain course tool were given orally.

Each group was given the online course class key and they enrolled themselves except for webCT.

Every week, I posted a question or discussion thread that requires the students to use a particular tense or grammatical point in the "Discussion Forum" and add grammar websites related to the grammatical structure discussed in class.

The same grammar websites (hyperlinks) related to the grammar topic covered in class were added. The same questions, discussion threads, grammar websites, daily grammar lesson, exercises and quizzes were posted in the three online courses. The **grammar websites contained** explanations, examples, exercises and quizzes and a daily grammar lessons. Documents on Study Skills and Powerpoint Presentations were also posted. Questions that required the use of a particular tense or grammatical structure were posted in the discussion forum of each online course. They checked the specific grammar links posted, answered the quizzes and were encouraged to check the daily grammar lesson. In addition, the students could post short paragraphs on any topic of their choice.

All the students were encouraged to check the grammar links and respond to the questions and discussion threads and to add grammar links.

At the end of the semester, post-treatment questionnaires were administered to all participants to reveal the technical, linguistic and cultural factors affecting their involvement in the three online courses.

#### **Results and Discussion**

At first, some of the students assigned to Moodle were hesitant to register, and some wanted to enroll using a nickname. Students assigned to Nicenet were hesitant to post and share in the discussion forums as they did not want make mistakes in front of everybody. Some thought they would play games and wondered what they were supposed to do.

Daily observations of student reactions, questions and discussions as well as responses to the post-treatment questionnaire showed that Nicenet was the most popular, whereas WebCT and Moodle were less popular. Students enrolled in Nicenet were the most active and responsive. They posted 183 responses in 4 weeks as opposed to 4 posts in Moodle and WebCT. The effective use of Nicenet and the ineffective use of Moodle and WebCT were due to the online course design, students' linguistic competence, and technical support provided. These are explained below:

The students reported that the Nicenet course is easy to use. It has a plain design and does not require advanced IT skills. It uses simple language. It uses few course tools: Discussion forums, resources, and personal messaging. The course tools are easily seen in the main page. Logging into the course and accessing the discussion forum and resources was easy. The students did not have to go through several webpages to login and access the discussion forums and resources. They found it easy to post threads and browse responses and resources. They liked the social atmosphere and support from peers and the sense of competition and enthusiasm among the students.

On the other hand, the inadequate use of Moodle and WebCT was due to the complexity of the course design. Each of them has many course tools. To log into WebCT, the students had to go through the KSU website then through several pages. To log into Moodle, they had to go through the OWCP main page then several webpages. The students reported that the WebCT and Moodle main pages are confusing, as each contains a lot of information. Accessing and using the discussion forums, resources, and a personal messaging tool were complicated because the students did not have adequate IT skills.

As to the linguistic factors, the Nicenet course uses few technical terms referring to the course tools. Since the students were in their first semester in the program and had a limited proficiency level in English, it was easy for them to understand those terms. Explaining their meaning in class was not time consuming. By contrast, Moodle and WebCT use many technical terms with which the students were not familiar. Explanations in class were abstract as the students could not see the course tools on the screen in class.

Finally, since the Nicenet course has few course tools, providing technical support and solving students' problems were easy and not time-consuming in class. On the contrary, Moodle and WebCT have many course tools, and the author could not provide hands-on practice as there were no PC's class and no Internet in the college. The author did not have sufficient time in the classroom to brainstorm topics before and after posting and could not go through the material in the hyperlinks in class.

Comparisons of the posttest scores showed significant differences among the three groups in grammar achievement. The Nicenet group made higher gains than the Moodle and the WebCT groups. However, improvement may not be attributed to the Nicenet online course itself, but to the extra practice provided by the course.

The post-treatment questionnaire revealed positive attitudes among the students who participated in the Nicenet course towards online learning and the grammar course under study. The Nicenet group found the online grammar course useful and fun and considered it a new way of leaning English grammar and doing homework. It created a warm climate between the students and instructor and among the students themselves. They found the exercises in the hyperlinks useful, as they provided more practice and gave instant feedback. The exercises helped clarify difficult points and helped the students review for the in-terms. It made the class material easier. However, some students did not take the initiative to post any responses if not prompted by the instructor and if the instructor does not post new topics and post a sample response.

By contrast, the WebCT and Moodle groups were not motivated and had negative attitudes towards online learning. They did not like them and found them difficult to use and time consuming. Many students did not take online instruction seriously as it was not used by other instructors and students at COLT. The author could not make the online course mandatory and could not allocate a proportion of the course grade to it. Using the Internet as a learning tool was not part of some students' culture. Some were so used to traditional instruction that depended on the book. They indicated that they were not net browsers and preferred to study the textbook only. They also believed that online courses should be used for fun not for credit and serious studying. Many Saudi college students do extra work for grades only. If online instruction is not part of tests and grades, they will not participate.

Overall, 15% reported that they did not have time to browse the website and they did not have internet access all the time. Some felt it should be used for fun not for credit or as a proper course. As a result, they did not take the online course seriously. They were passive rather than active learners reading and posting answers and topics.

Some shortcomings of the Nicenet online course were: The students could not format their posted material. They could not insert nor upload pictures, digital pictures or video clips to support the material that they posted. They could not have audio or video conferencing with each other when posting messages in the forum.

The positive impact of Nicenet on students' achievement and attitudes in the current study is consistent with findings of other studies by the author that used online instruction in teaching a variety of language courses as Al-Jarf (2006a), Al-Jarf (2006b), Al-Jarf (2006c), Al-Jarf (2006d), Al-Jarf (2006e), Al-Jarf (2005b), Al-Jarf (2005c), Al-Jarf (2005d), Al-Jarf (2005e), Al-Jarf (2004a), Al-Jarf (2004b), Al-Jarf (2003a), Al-Jarf (2003b), Al-Jarf (2002).

#### **Conclusion**

Online courses must be selected carefully and must be introduced gradually when used in a notech environment and with freshman students with a low proficiency level in English and computer terms and with no prior experience in online instruction such as Saudi EFL freshman students at COLT. Online instruction from home may start with Nicenet. When students become more sophisticated linguistically and technologically, they might proceed to Moodle or WebCT.

Since Moodle and WebCT are open source courses, the instructor may start with two tools (discussion forums and resources) and add tools gradually.

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