SOME FEATURES OF MOODLE FOR ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Abstract. *It is now widely known that modern technologies offer numerous possibilities for language teaching and learning, which may also be applied to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are currently being globally used, as they present online spaces where teachers can organize their work, and the work of their students. Moodle, as one of the most popular VLEs, has been used at the Faculty of Information Technology, University "Mediterranean" Podgorica, Montenegro, since 2009, where it has proved itself to be one of the most beneficial technological means to be applied in ESP teaching and learning. The aim of the paper is to illustrate how Moodle supports communicative and collaborative learning, and how students can improve their communication and the four language skills, enhance specific vocabulary, and simulate some real-life situations. Some blocks and modules in Moodle for providing students with adequate teaching materials, and the ways of assigning different activities to students will be discussed. In conclusion, the vital role of teacher in applying Moodle in ESP will be emphasized.*

Key words: *Moodle, Virtual Learning Environment – VLE, technology, block, resource, activity, English for Specific Purposes – ESP, teacher*

1. INTRODUCTION

The overall development of information and communication technology has a strong impact on General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching and learning. English for Specific Purposes is not a specific language variety, but foreign or second language teaching whose primary aim is to be adapted to specific learner needs (Mišić Ilić, 2011, p. 876). This means that the use of technologies in ESP does not differ from their use in General English. With the development of technologies, especially computers and the Internet, and, more recently, mobile telephony, the ways they are used have also changed. In the beginning, the accent was on grammar and vocabulary exercises, and with the development of Web 2.0, communication and interaction are in focus. Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne (in Laakkonen, 2011, p. 12) consider that Web 2.0 changes the position of students from consumers to producers and creators, and their role in the educational community to those who also create materials and contribute to learning. Now, the approaches to the use of modern technologies are aligned with socio-cognitive approaches to learning and teaching (Noytim, 2006, p. 76). In addition, Gilbert (2013, p. 132) cites Wang and Vasqez

who claim that the research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has moved from cognitive to social orientation, emphasizing that this shift coincides with the most important characteristics of Web 2.0 technologies, such as accessibility, communication, sharing of information, and collaboration.

Regardless of whether the technologies are applied in or outside the classroom, it is important to constantly explore the ways the emerging technologies are applied. Since learning a language means acquiring and developing the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking, as well as grammar and vocabulary, applications and software designed for language learning, or those used for that purpose, must be focused on at least one of the skills. Students have to know how to acquire and/or improve these skills. As Ward (2005, p. 6) points out, if a student just clicks on the words in the software, the use of technology is no different from a drill in the classroom. A teacher is usually responsible for the selection of suitable technology in teaching, depending on the skill(s) they want to focus on. Bloch suggests that it is necessary to achieve the following objectives in technology-assisted learning: to identify the needs of students, choose the appropriate technology, and learn how this technology is used (2013, 397).

The way technologies for learning are classified depends on the following: the interaction they create (one-way and two-way technologies); the time they enable communication (synchronous and asynchronous communication); who uses them - the creator or user of the material; their use in the language skills acquisition and practice (E-creation tools and self-made computer-based resources; communicative-facilitative E-tools; writing/reading-facilitative E-tools; and, listening-facilitative E-tools).

In addition to the technology that promotes the acquisition and improvement of linguistic skills, there are various learning platforms through which the aforementioned tools and applications can be used for learning languages.

Learning Platforms, Virtual Learning Environments – VLEs, Learning Management Systems – LMS, Content Management Systems – CMS are the terms that represent tools for electronic course management. A learning platform is an online space where teachers can organize their work, and the work of their students. It is a program that enables easy and efficient management of content of any type (text, image, sound, video), and is therefore very suitable for e-learning.

Most learning platforms provide the ability to assign roles in the system and define the workload for each role. For example, there may be the roles of administrators, teachers, teaching assistants and students (and, even, guests). Learning platforms can be password protected, so only authorized participants can have access.

There are hundreds of VLEs available on the Internet[1], and the most popular ones are Moodle, Edmodo and Blackboard. Here, I will present Moodle and some of its features which I find valuable for my ESP courses.

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[1] Available at http://www.capterra.com/learning-management-system-software/

2. MOODLE

Moodle is an acronym for *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment* and it is, actually, a result of a PhD thesis whose author, Martin Dougiamas, studied the use of open source solutions in internet-based education. On 16 June 2017, Moodle had almost 82,000 (81, 995) sites used by 105,789,469 users from 236 countries (fig. 1).
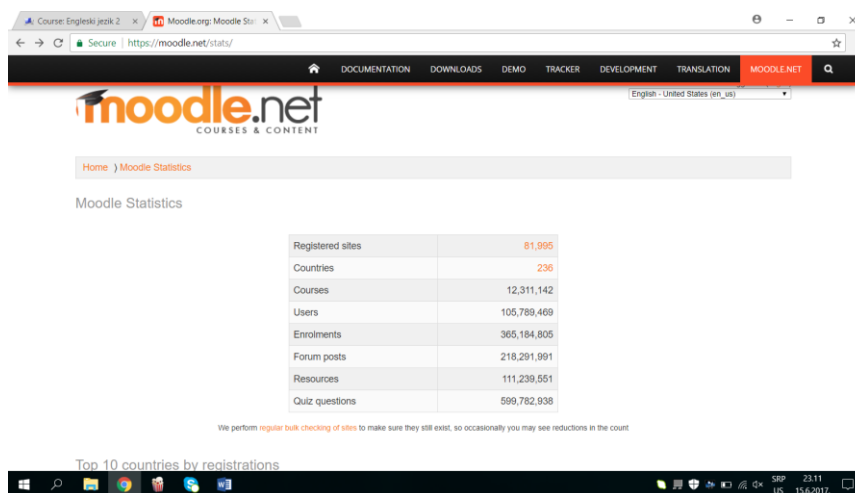

Fig. 1 Moodle statistics (https://moodle.net/stats/, retrieved 15/6/2017)

Moodle is a free, open source platform for e-education where participants can manage learning materials. "Moodle is the empty box where linguistic data (of course, any data you want!!) can be stored" (Nishina, 2009, p. 208). Working with Moodle is very simple and the users are not required to have particular computer skills.

I started using Moodle in January 2009, when the Education Council of the Faculty of Information Technology – FIT (University "Mediterranean" Podgorica, Montenegro), where I teach General English and English for IT, made the decision to implement it as an e-learning platform. My colleagues and I had a short training at the faculty where we all got the manuals for using Moodle, which was very helpful to start with. In addition, the book *Moodle 1.9 for Second Language Learning* was, and still is, a rich source of ideas for using Moodle for language teaching and learning.

Stanford, the author of the book, lists the characteristics of the learning platform that support the key features of communicative language learning which can be applied to ESP teaching and learning: the autonomy of students, the social nature of learning, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment, and teachers as co-learners (2009, 12-13). Ward (2005, 35-37) suggests the activities such as chat, forum, news and workshops that enhance communicative language learning and student-centered learning. Some other useful activities available at Moodle, which I find beneficial for my courses, are: wiki, blog, glossary, questionnaire, quiz, different types of assignments, etc.

2.1. Moodle at the FIT

Moodle has been used at the Faculty of Information Technology, University "Mediterranean" Podgorica, Montenegro, for more than eight years now. Currently, we have 436 users of 105 courses[2], six of which are English courses. From the beginning of the implementation of Moodle at the FIT, my colleagues and I have noticed an increase in student activity. It is absolutely beneficial for those students who work or cannot attend classes for some reason, so, by accessing the teaching materials, forums, messages, etc., they are able to follow the course as if they were in the classroom. Moodle is also useful for students who attend classes regularly as they have access to all the courses on the platform and they may go through the teaching materials in case they missed or misunderstood something during the classes. They all can do tests, send homework, read texts and books, fulfill questionnaires, and do many other things. It is evident that the students access the materials and provide feedback, but also interact with their teachers regularly.

One of the advantages of Moodle is that the materials posted on it, as well as all system features that it provides, can be used in the classroom, too. Thus, students of the FIT can access the materials directly in the classroom, and record some additional information and notes during classes, or do exercises and planned activities at seminars. Students can also listen to audio and/or video materials or take tests, and visit different webpages via provided links. We have communication on daily basis via forums and messages, and students get information in the news block.

Students' Moodle accounts are directly connected to their email accounts, so, all news or messages posted on a course are directly forwarded to their email address, which means they are directly informed about everything related to the course.

As it can be seen in Figure 2, a Moodle page consists of three parts: there are two panels on the left and the right side, with different blocks which can be made visible or invisible for users. This means you may add them to (or remove from) your course, depending on your needs. Sometimes, your administrator may restrict the use of blocks, in order to protect the server of your institution, as prevent it from being overloaded.
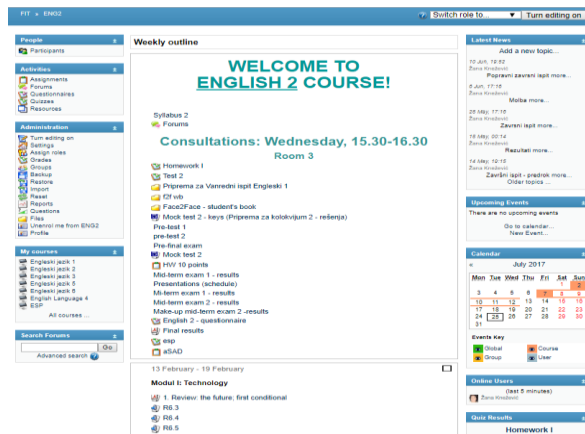

Fig. 2 A Moodle page

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[2] In summer semester 2016/17

The middle part consists of core modules, which represent the content of your course. Here I will introduce some blocks and show the way to add the content to your Moodle course.

2.2. Moodle Blocks

Participants is the block where you may see the list of students who have enrolled for your course. When you click on the name of a participant, you can see basic information about them (*Profile*), but also four other buttons: *Forum posts*, *Blog*, *Notes* and *Activity reports* (Figure 3). In the former two fields, you may follow the student's writings in *Forum* and *Blog*, and in *Notes* you may add records about the student's progress, for example. *Activity reports* provides you with information about how often and how long they visited your course, and what exactly they did. If you pick your name, you will be able to edit your profile.

Fig. 3 The profile of a participant

Administration enables you to create, modify, edit, or backup your Moodle course. Here I will present just a few basic options:

– When you click on ***Turn editing on***, you can start the work with your course (there is the same button in the right upper corner of the course, next to *Switch role to…*).

Every block will have this menu: , the modules will have this one: , and the files this one: . The open eye means that students can see the block, module or file. If you do not want to make it visible for your students, click on it, and the eye will get closed. If you want to delete the block, module or file, click on the cross. The arrows are used for moving the block up, down, left or right, and after clicking next to a file, fields like this will appear throughout the modules: . These are, actually, the positions where you may move the file.

– ***Settings*** helps you edit your course settings – you name and format the course. Just fill in the fields, and when you come to *Format*, select the one you find most suitable for you (LAMS course, SCORM, Social, Topics, or Weekly). If you are not certain which one to choose, click on where you may find descriptions for all the formats (this sign always provides information about related options). I always opt for Weekly format, because my

experience shows it is the easiest way for students to follow the program. By choosing this format, you will have to define the number of weeks and the start date of the course. The system will automatically show students which week is active, i.e. which teaching materials they should focus on (the module is highlighted with orange lines, Figure 4). Some of the fields might be defined by your administrator, such as *Maximum upload size* and *Role renaming*.
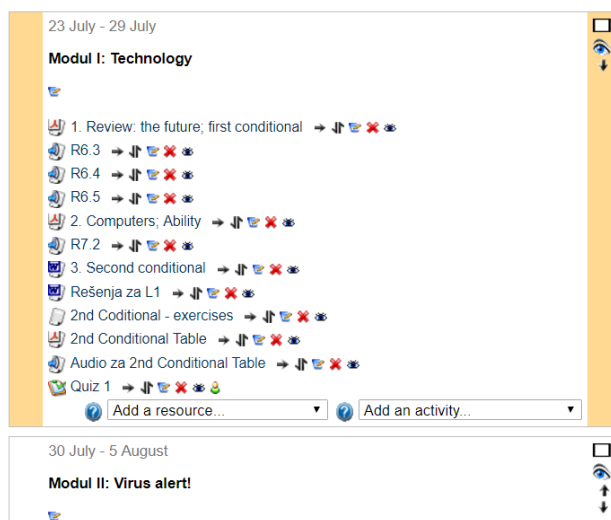

Fig. 4 A highlighted module

− In **Grades** you may see the results your students' achieved in different activities that you had assigned, and in **Groups** you may create groups of students for specific activities (this will be discussed later, in the section about **Wiki**).

− Another very useful option from the **Activities** block is *Files*. Here you may find all resources (folders and files) which you uploaded, rename, move or delete them, or upload new ones. A back-up copy of your course is also stored here. To upload a file for your course, follow these steps: *Upload a file → Choose file.* After you choose one, click on *Upload this file.* Your administrator may limit the size of files you may upload.

The other group of blocks is set on the right side of the FIT's Moodle:

Latest news, as its name suggests, provides students with the news you post. As stated earlier, the most important thing is that the information you share here is directly forwarded to students' email addresses, so students receive the email immediately, being in that way informed twice (in this way, they cannot deny they were informed about homework, seminar papers, interviews, or any other news that you posted).

Upcoming events block is connected to **Calendar**. When you define a date (for example, for a seminar paper submission) it is immediately seen in the Calendar. In order to set a date, you should follow these instructions: select *New event*, then *Course event*, and click on *OK*. Next, fill the fields *Name* and *Description* and select the date. If students are given
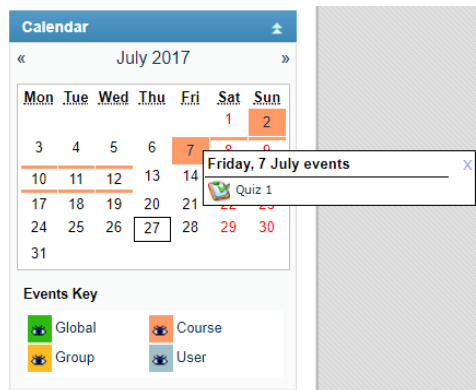
Fig. 5 Display of Calendar

more than one day for the event, check *Until* in *Duration* section and choose the date. Finally, click on *Save changes*.

Now, you can see the date(s) highlighted in the calendar. If you hover over it, you (and your students) see the information about the event (Figure 5). In the **Calendar**, you may see four different types (colors) of events, depending on the type you chose in *Type of event* (in my case, I opted for *Course event*), which is an excellent reminder for students and you.

Messages can be used for non-synchronous communications with students. You may send messages individually or to a group of students. Just like **Latest news,** the message is forwarded to the student's email address. Frequent messaging may overload the server, and your administrator may make this block unavailable.

Course summary – as its name suggests is used to describe the course or its outcomes.

Form maker is a very useful block if you want your students to apply for an event (for example, to present a topic). To make the form, click on Configuration button in the block's menu, and name it. Then, enter the values that you request from your students (e.g. Name, ID number, topic of seminar paper…). The field with student's e-mail is automatically added (Figure 6). Next, check *Must have Moodle account* (otherwise students may not be able to submit the application) → *Show number of submissions* (to know how many students have applied) → *Confirmation message* (e.g. You have successfully submitted your topic) → *Limit date* (be careful about the format of the date) → *Save changes*. The final look of the **Form maker** block can be seen on the right in Figure 6.

Fig. 6 Entering the values and the final look of the Form Maker block

Finally, the last block I will present is **Blog**. Blog**,** a short for web log, is a website where users post personal notes or journals. Blogs are recommended as a very constructive tool for developing and improving writing and reading skills in general language and language for specific purposes learning, where students can develop their ideas and various rhetorical strategies (Bloch 2013, 390). The materials posted on the blog cannot be changed or edited, but readers can leave their comments. Depending on the content which is posted, there are several types of blogs: vlogs (video log) - a blog that contains video, linklog - containing links, photoblog or Flog - containing photos.

There are two types of blogs in Moodle: OU (Open University) and core (Moodle) blogs. They have the same purpose, but OU blog fosters some additional features, such as leaving comments (teacher and other students may leave comments), embedding videos, or some audio programs. The server of my faculty does not support the OU option, so I use core blog. This is the way it is set:

In **Blocks**, select **Blogs menu.** You and your students will be able to see four options (Figure 8):

– *Add new entry***:** enter a title, and then write your blog. I always suggest writing blogs as a Word document and then copying and pasting it into *Blog entry body*, because the writing sessions are time limited by the system (in my case, to 10 minutes). For this reason, students get logged off if they are on the same page longer than 10 minutes, and they lose their data. When students write their blog, they are asked to add tags (*User defined tags*), which altogether form the **Blog Tags** block**.** This block is connected to **Blog** and is automatically launched on your course page, as you can see in Figure 7. The bigger the font of a word, the more entries it has (more often it is tagged);

Fig. 7 Blog menu and Blog tags

– *View my entries:* here every user (a teacher or a student) can see their own blogs;
– *Blog preferences:* you define how many blogs you want to see per page;

– *View course entries:* this is the most important part – you and your students can see all posted blogs. There is also the **Notes** button**,** which you may use to write notes about your students' blogs and discuss them later with the students, for example.

Moodle offers more blocks (Figure 8) and you may find them useful for your courses as well. For instance, some of my colleagues recommend *Quiz Results*, which may show the highest or the lowest grades of a quiz, and the results may be displayed as percentages, fractions or absolute numbers, with students' names or ID numbers. They claim this has a positive impact on students' motivation.
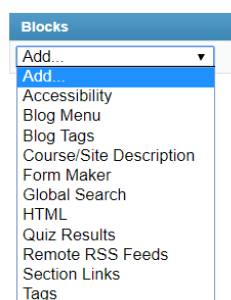
Fig. 8 Different Moodle blocks

2.3. Modules

In the middle section of a Moodle page, there are core modules (Stanford, 2009, p. 24), which present the course content given through the **Add a resource** and **Add an activity** elements. Moodle courses are created by uploading teaching materials through these two possibilities.

At the very beginning, through *Settings* in **Administration** block, I set weekly format for a course (14 weeks). Above these fourteen modules, there is an introductory one. Here, I usually post additional files and links, such as the course syllabus, mock tests, test and exam results, the list of irregular verbs, literature, etc. You can name every module, or add a notification, by using option *Insert a label* in **Add a resource.** Choose appropriate size and colour of fonts and edit it.

Add a resource offers different types of resources we can use for our courses. I mostly use ***Link to a file or a website*** option to post previously prepared materials (Word documents, pdf, PowerPoint, audio, video materials) and resources. With this option we may also provide a link to a website.

To post a file, follow these instructions:

Type the name of the file as you want your students to see it in field *Name*; then, click on *Choose or upload a file…*, and the page with files will appear. Click on *Choose* that is in the line with the related file, and you will get back to the previous page. Now, check *Force download* (best option, according to my administrator), choose *Visible*, and, finally, click on *Save and return to course* or *Save and display,* to see how students see the page*.*

If you want to add a link instead of a file, you can do it in two ways: 1) if you already have the web address you want to provide as a link, enter or copy it from another tab or window in field *Location*. Make sure you do not have double "http://" in your link. Then, in Location section, select *New window* (it is easier for students to have a link opened in a new window, so they do not move from the Moodle page), and *Visible,* in *Common*

module settings. Finally, click on *Save and return to the course.* 2) in *Link to a file or web site* section, select *Search for web page*, and find the wanted page. Then follow the same instructions as in the previous way.

Instead of uploading and storing a file in *Files*, you can write a text directly in *Compose a text page*: name the text in field *Name* and type the text in *Full text.* I recommend writing the text in Word, copy and paste it in *Full text*, to escape the possibility to lose your data in case your sessions are time limited. Select *New window*, and *Show* to make it visible, and click on *Save and return to course.*

My experience with **Compose a web page** is very weak – I use it only to embed a video from the web. To do so, after you name the resource, click on <> (HTML source) in the toolbar of the *Full text* field, copy the embed code of the video from YouTube or similar webpage and paste it in the field (Figure 9). Repeat final steps: *New window, Show, Save and return to course.*
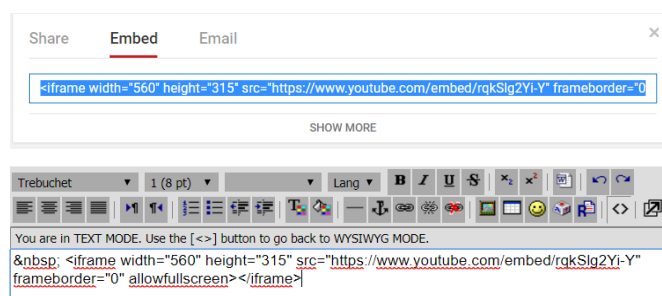
Fig. 9 Embed code from YouTube copied and pasted

If you want to display a directory from *Files*, and enable students to browse different related files, use **Display a directory.** After you select this option in **Add a resource**, name it and select the directory from the drop menu in the **Display a directory** field**.** Make it visible (*Show*) and save it.

By offering your students different resources presented through different types of media, you give them an opportunity to choose and find the best way to broaden their language knowledge and develop language skills, and feel as if they were in the classroom. Even more, you can engage them with different types of activities presented in **Add an activity.** Most of Moodle activities include grading facilities, which makes them suitable for alternative assessment.

Assignments is very useful when your students have to submit and upload essays, translations, reports, audio and/or video materials, pictures, or any other digital content. Moodle offers four types of assignments, but I use *Advanced uploading of files* and *Uploading a simple file*. The only difference between these two assignments is in the number of files they have to upload.

After you choose the type of assignment you want to give to your students, you will have to name and describe it, i.e. give an explanation what students are supposed to do. Define *Grading* (if applicable), and the date from when the assignment is available and the due date. Select *yes* or *no* options in the following fields as they suit you, make it visible and click on *Save and return to course.*

Figure 10 presents how students see the assignment:

Fig. 10 Students' view of the assignment

In my example, students are supposed to translate a short text. After they translate it, they will click on *Choose File*, select the file with the translation and then upload it (*Upload the file*).

Click on the assignment, and follow the link *View x submitted assignments*[3] in the upper right corner. You will see a list of students with submitted assignments. Click on *Grade* and a window will pop up. Download the assignment and grade it manually (highlighted in Figure 11). Finally, click on *Save changes.*

Fig. 11 How to download and grade an assignment

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[3] "x" means a specific number

One of the key characteristics of ESP is a specific vocabulary. Coxhead cites Nation who claims that ESP vocabularies range in size between 1,000 and 5,000 words, depending on the subject area (2013, p. 116). **Glossary** in Moodle is a very useful activity for developing ESP vocabulary.

Select this activity from the **Add an activity** menu, name it and add description (eg. This is the key vocabulary of Unit 1). Then select the options which you find suitable for you in the following fields. Finally, click on *Save and display*, and start entering words: click on *Add new entry* and type in a new word in the field *Concept*, and add an explanation in *Description*. You may add a picture in *Choose file* to illustrate the word. If you want to make different categories of words, eg. nouns, verbs, adjectives, or, computer programs, programming languages, etc., follow these steps: *Browse by category → Edit categories → Add category.* Students follow the same steps to add new words and you may monitor their activity in *Browse by author.*

Questionnaire is a very beneficial activity if you want to get a feedback from your students, once, or more or less frequently (every day, weekly, monthly), and it can be done anonymously or in full name. It can also be used as a quiz, as students can be graded. I use it as an evaluation of activities I employ in my courses, since I want to check how students perceive them and if they find them useful.

Name and write a short summary in the marked fields, define open and close dates, and select appropriate response options; click on *Save and display.* Now, go to *Questions* and from the drop menu (*---Page break---*) choose a type of questions, and click on *Add selected question type.* Then complete the required fields, and save changes. It is important to decide if the answer is mandatory, that is, if students have to answer the question. If they do not answer a mandatory question, they will not be able to submit their answers. Repeat the steps for each question. When you create your questionnaire, you may preview it by clicking on *Preview* button.

Quiz – is an activity which can be used as an exercise or as a form of assessment.

The first step is to fulfill the fields for quiz: name it, define the dates for opening and closing the quiz, set (optimal) time limit. I suggest choosing *yes* for *Shuffle questions* and *Shuffle within question*, especially if you do not have a wide range of questions. This decreases the chance that students may have identical quizzes. In *Review options*, I check *After the quiz is closed* if the quiz is graded as an assignment. In this way, students can see the feedback only after the quiz is closed. Finally, click on *Save and display*.

Now, choose *Category* and start creating questions: from the drop menu select the type of question you want and make questions. There you will find different types of questions: multiple choice, checking box, cloze, matching, true/false, essay, short answer, etc. Not all offered types of questions are suitable for language learning. On the other hand, I have not used *Cloze* for my quizzes yet, because I find it a bit complicating. In my opinion, it requires a lot of typing, and other types of questions can replace it successfully.

Be very careful when you type correct answers – even a wrong letter may cause negative points for students.

After you create a bank of questions, select a number of random questions (bottom right corner) and click on *Add.* In this way, your students will have different combinations of questions in their quiz. If you want them to have the same questions, then select particular questions and click on *Add to quiz. Now,* on the left side of the page

you will see as many questions as you have selected (Figure 12). Grade the questions and click on *Save changes.*

Fig. 12 Question bank and randomly added questions

To see how the quiz looks like, click on button *Preview.*

After your students submit their answers, you can see their grades (and answers for every question) by clicking on button *Results.* If a student wants to see their result in details, you can show them where they have made a mistake. Also, in case you have made a mistake (in a question or an answer) you can grade it manually.

The last Moodle activity that I use and recommend is **Wiki**. A wiki is a website that supports the collaborative creating and editing texts. The original idea about wiki was to create a website whose content could be edited, changed and improved by a group of people, so the website would be regularly updated. The best-known wiki is Wikipedia, edited in various languages by people from around the world. By editing a wiki, an interaction between students is created and, working together, students exchange their knowledge and improve reading and writing skills. In this way, students take responsibility for their own learning (learner autonomy – one of the key features of ESP).

However, this activity requires the teachers' full involvement, as they have to follow students' work, guide them and give them feedback on regular basis.

As wikis support collaborative work, and Pratt (2010, p. 94) suggests that the teams of four to five members give best results, I divide students in groups of four. To create groups in Moodle, go to *Groups* in the **Administration** block. Then, click on *Create group*, name it and save changes. Next, click on *Add/Remove users* and choose the students for the group and click on *Add*. After you click on *Back to groups*, repeat the procedure to create new groups.

Now that you have created groups, assign them wikis. Choose *Wiki* from the **Add an activity** drop menu and make sure you give the wiki the exact name of the group that is assigned the wiki. That means that if Group 1 is responsible for a wiki, you will name the wiki Group 1. In *Summary*, explain what students have to do, and then choose *Groups* as the type of the wiki, which means that members of the group can edit it.

In *Group mode* select *Visible groups*, which means that other groups/students can see the wikis of the other groups', but cannot edit them (in *Separate groups* students can see only the wiki of their group, and *No groups* is applied when you have only one wiki, i.e. all students work collaboratively and can edit it). Finally, click on *Save and display* and you will see the page as students see it when they follow the wiki link.

On the other hand, you may monitor students' progress, but make sure you choose the exact name of the group in the *Other wikis* field (upper right corner) as presented in Figure 13.
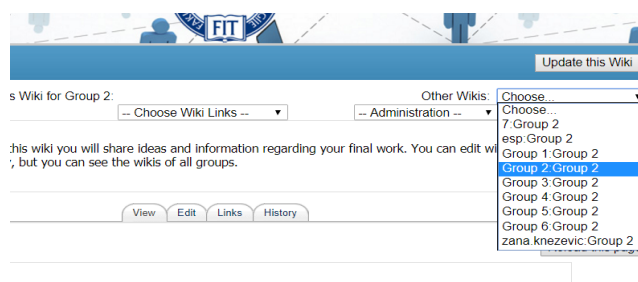

Fig. 13. Reviewing a student's wiki

In this example, I selected wiki **Group 2** and in order to see their writing, I have to select the exact group by selecting **Group 2: Group 2**.

Now you may choose to edit it, see the history or links, by clicking on one of the related buttons.

Moodle offers more other possibilities for teachers and students through blocks, resources and activities. It depends on us which ones we will use, but we definitely have to try them and find if, or how much, they are suitable for our students.

3. CONCLUSION

The use of technology (computer, internet, communication, or any other) for its own sake in language learning has no value if it is not monitored and mediated by a teacher. Teachers, as well, have to keep in mind that a technology, an application or a tool, has to have its purpose: what they want to be achieved by their students when they use a technology, an application or a tool. They have to choose the proper and flexible methodology in order to meet their goals – enable their students to improve their language, that is, to improve the four language skills and specific vocabulary both in ESP and General English. Discovering new options in applying Moodle in ESP is an imperative for all the teachers who are going to deal with this approach to the English Language teaching and learning.

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