

Evaluation Considerations for On-line ESL Courses

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This article looks at the types of language learning materials and courses currently available on-line then looks at different principles to consider when designing, or choosing, an on-line English course.

Introduction

New technologies and the Internet are rapidly changing how we traditionally perceive education. In order to remain competitive, universities find they must keep up with technological advances by implementing them in their classrooms. Nowadays students and potential employers are not satisfied sitting through a course with only a textbook and a lecturer, demanding a more hands-on and integrative approach to learning (Hammonds et al, 1997). Similarly, while many adults realise the importance of lifelong learning in order to improve their chances of promotion or to enable them to make a career change, they are often too busy, too distant, or feel intimidated to attend traditional face-to-face (f2f) courses. On-line distance learning has proven to be a convenient, time-efficient, and cost-effective alternative, resulting in strong growth over the past ten years (Barfield and Katsura, 1996; Bourne et al, 1997; Furnell et al; Sherry, 1996; Thornton, 1999).

The Internet has also increased the need to understand English since there is no question this is the language used for the majority of the content available on the World Wide Web (Holderness, 1995). Additionally, English has turned out to be the language of choice for world communication with the rise of multinational companies, free trade agreements, and ease of travel. As a result, people feel the need to study English more than ever before, and what better way is there to accommodate such learners than teaching them on-line? Using the Internet for English study is motivating, the international context of English on the web provides the learner with greater opportunities to communicate across cultures (especially EFL students), and learners appreciate the usefulness of acquiring ESL skills (Fox, 1998; Muehleisen, 1997).

This article looks at the types of language learning materials and courses currently available on-line then looks at different principles to consider when designing, or choosing, an on-line English course.

Types of On-line Language Learning Sites

Jones (2000) describes three models of on-line language learning sites currently available on the Internet; distributive, tutorial, and co-operative.

- In the **distributive** model, materials or lesson sheets are made available on-line for the learner to study independently. The key characteristic is that communication is one-way from the material designer to the learner. They can consist of reading or listening (if you have the correct plug-in software installed) passages with multiple choice or gap-fill questions where the answers are automatically assessed (usually using Java applets or JavaScript).
- In the **tutorial** model materials are supplemented with two-way communication between the teacher and the individual learner. This interaction can be either asynchronous (e-mail or voice mail) or synchronous (chat rooms, Internet phone, or video conferencing). Students are usually given assignments to submit via the Internet or e-mail and the teacher offers feedback on them.
- In the **co-operative** model, students share exchanges amongst each other as well as with the teacher. Like the tutorial model, exchanges can be either asynchronous or synchronous. The content may contain role-plays or consist of group tasks that require collaboration with other students to complete.

Principles to Consider

Who is on-line language learning for?

We are at a crossroads. On the one hand, the Internet is as an excellent medium to provide English language lessons to vast numbers of people of different cultural, geographical and socio-economic backgrounds in an attempt at bringing the world closer through shared communication, making this place we live a more harmonious one. On the other hand, on-line learning is a lucrative business opportunity to cash in on. In 2000, the fact that the total global expenditure on education was estimated between US\$1 trillion and US\$2.1 trillion (Dhanarajan, 2001) leads one to consider the potential of a course targeted towards a wealthy niche market who have access to broadband telecommunication systems, video-conferencing, and other hi-tech gadgetry. Through careful organisation, however, it is possible to design an on-line course that could cater to both types of learners. The paying learners would support operating costs while the non-paying learners would, in turn, create a richer learning environment for all. Of course, the non-paying customers would have limited access and less individual teacher feedback would be offered to them.

What aspects of language should be taught?

The aspects of language should be appropriate to the environment it is being taught. Keeping this in mind, the objectives of the course should be to enable learners how to navigate the Internet and effectively communicate using computer-mediated communication in English.

What type of learning environment or model should be used?

The previous section mentioned three types of language learning sites: distributive, tutorial, and co-operative. One of the on-line programmes I had the opportunity to visit contains aspects of each model. Exercises and quizzes fitting the distributive model, for example, can be used for self-assessment of students' progress. They can also easily be made available free of charge, since it is simply a set form posted on the Web allowing access to any Internet-user. The tutorial model is suitable for giving feedback to individual learners, avoiding the risk of causing embarrassment or intimidation if the feedback is made available to everyone. Overall, however, the co-operative model is probably the most beneficial for the learner. It encourages collaborative learning supporting Vygotsky and Feuerstein's belief that 'the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people' (Williams and Burden, 1997: 40). The co-operative model also provides excellent opportunities for students to participate in stimulating task-based activities.

Class size doesn't really matter. However, group tasks requiring collaboration with others work better in smaller groups. This is also true in face to face classrooms. However, greater numbers especially make on-line communication confusing, making it difficult for learners of English to follow the discourse. So, for example, a class of forty students could be subdivided into ten or so smaller groups for taskwork.

Which form of interaction should be used, synchronous or asynchronous?

Synchronous communication requires learners and teachers to adjust their schedules accordingly to be available and on-line at the same time. This poses several difficulties especially when dealing with people in different time zones. Some current on-line language programs, however, have a program containing a countdown clock displaying when the next "chat session" will take where learners (and I assume a facilitator of some sort) can participate in synchronous textual exchanges can be found on some current on-line language programs. However, after witnessing some of the dialogues taking place in 'chat rooms', I wonder what benefits learners would gain from such mundane discussion. Regardless, adding a chat room onto an Internet site is simple enough so making it available as an additional free service for students wishing to participate in such an activity is not such a bad idea, however, paying a facilitator to monitor the chat room may be unjustifiable.

Asynchronous communication, on the other hand, provides students with the 'capability to learn anywhere and at any time' making it more convenient for learners (Bourne, 1997). Moreover, asynchronous communication allows the learners to organise their thoughts so they can produce more detailed and accurate dialogues while at the same time providing them time to understand what others write.

Conclusion

On-line language learning courses have a lot of potential. They not only enable learners unable to attend face to face courses but,

more importantly, provide opportunities to learn in a collaborative environment with people of different nationalities and cultures. Keys to structuring a successful on-line course are simplicity and convenience. Kelly (2000) wisely points out that 'as a teacher, you would not write things on the blackboard ignoring three blind students in your classroom of 50 students. Shouldn't we also be as considerate to our web site visitors?'. Additional frills (e.g. video conferencing, movable graphics, etc.) limit access so designing a course requiring simple e-mail and Internet-browsing features is preferable. Similarly, asynchronous communication is more convenient than synchronous communication for learners with various schedules in different parts of the World. The content should be limited to features of the Internet and computer-mediated communication. The content should be limited to skills needed to use the Internet and CmC. Therefore, concentrating on reading and writing skills in a collaborative environment is most suitable. Activities focusing on listening and speaking skills should be left for face to face instruction where the actual situation can be more closely simulated. Finally, taking advantage of the context in which an on-line course is being delivered, the content should concentrate on using English for the Internet and e-mail. Therefore, concentrating on reading and writing skills in a collaborative environment is most suitable. Finally, since it is an on-line course, the content should be on using English for the Internet and e-mail.

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