E-Learning: A Pedagogical Frontier or a Heterotopia?

Prem Kumari Srivastava

E-Learning: Defining it more…

Like any "'new' complex phenomenon", (Carneiro and Nascimbeni, 2007, p. 2) e-Learning has been attracting a lot of interest from different stakeholders in the education sector. From postal tuition, part time-Learning, correspondence education to extra-mural studies, open and distance Learning was institutionalized in 1968 in UK.[1] Also known as blended learning or online e-Learning material/tutorials, it forms a part of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of today. In India, it was started as a pilot project under CBSE and within three years had a success story to tell. Today, it has a decisive role in 'Education for All' and in the emerging 'World of Knowledge Societies'.[2] Presently, a number of theoretical readings and attempts at analysis are primarily coming from the west.[3] An informed critical apparatus in India is yet to take shape though Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) and others are making some serious attempts.[4] The idea that inheres in most of them is that as an assistive technological tool for access and knowledge, e-Learning disavows the intimidation related to the persona of a live/physical teacher (in many cases) and re-centres a hegemony of the dominant discourse of rote and memory-based learning (Singh, 2010).[5] Professor Roger McHaney[6] calls it 'the new digital shoreline' with indigenous populations at its edges.

Much has been written about the language teacher and the pedagogical strategies used in language classrooms. When conventional literature teacher becomes a de-motivated casual language teacher, it sure heralds doom for the students. Such teachers' classroom lectures in literature are inspiring but the language classes are boring. In an attempt to help the really weak students pass exams, the language teacher supports rote-learning by setting familiar in-text questions, thus, causing great damage to the acquisition of the language. Because the evaluation is text-centric, attempts at innovation in classroom teaching are totally sacrificed. An analogy that has stayed ever since it was drawn[7] is a cogent comment on the condition of language teaching:

*A teacher taught his student, the parrot, three languages. Once, his linguist friend visited him. In a show of pride, the teacher said that he would like his linguist friend to meet his student, the parrot whom he had taught three languages. When the linguist met the parrot, the parrot did not speak and remained silent. When asked, the teacher said, "I had told you that I had **taught** three languages. I did not say that the parrot had **learned** three languages!"*

So, the disconnect between teaching and learning needs to be bridged. Recently, in the wake of several online, technology-charged and media- rich Language learning courses made available on the internet and by many publishing houses, the language teacher is faced with another challenging task: to hone up their technological instinct and become computer

savvy! Technology offers a huge novel resource to teachers. Instead of being worried about its misuse, the teachers' time has come to 'rise and shine' and face the music which is indeed loud and clear. It is 'e' in nature!

How often have we witnessed classrooms where students have just walked out because the lecture was boring / ineffective or the teacher ill prepared or incompetent? Student absenteeism in the classroom across universities is common, but not always for the reason cited above. But in an e-Lesson, a student can actually skip a lesson if found boring and can write back to the facilitator, comment on his blog, or give a feedback. The hesitations that an Indian student faces to give feedback to a human teacher, might remain even in online feedback, the difference being that in an online feedback the student may not really know the evaluator. But the possibilities abound.

Heterogeneity, Self-paced Learning and Mutative Platform

Heterogeneous student composition and different proficiency levels of learner groups are a concern the world over. E-Learning provides customized learning with its inherent quality of preferred pace of learning. According to practitioners and e-content developers, it is very easy to update and change material depending on the needs of a particular course, class or student. For example, it is very easy to create several levels within the same topic, and attach quizzes at each level. The learner moves to the next higher level only after scoring satisfactorily in the attached quiz. Quizzes themselves can carry difficulty tags or tags that tell a student about the kind of learning that is being tested. This may range from simple reproduction of material learnt, or an application based on the materials or a higher order-thinking questions. The most important aspect is that the student can decide his or her own pace.[8] In one of the

feedback sessions that were conducted at the English Language Learning workshop at the South Campus, University of Delhi, this became apparent. While approximately 40 students from the First Year undergraduate programme were looking at e-Lessons made on a qualifying language course that is taught to them at the undergraduate level, a noteworthy aspect of e-Learning emerged: self-paced learning. Two sets of student constituencies were noticed. One set of the students was more attentive learners in the actual face-to-face class and was distracted when engaged in e-lessons. Contrarily, some of the least expressive and quieter ones in the classroom were deeply engrossed in the e-Lessons. A conclusion that can be drawn is that the first set was so tuned-in to listening to a teacher in the classroom that self-learning for them was too new and a shocking experience to handle. They can be called the teacher/face to face communication dependant set. The other set was used to self-learning; each at their own pace as their face-to-face interaction in class with the teacher was very low. Thus, what emerged were unique and different learner groups for classroom learning and e-Learning.

For a Language Learner

For a language learner, this platform provides innovative pedagogical strategies like wiki-forums, keypals and shared 'talking books'. Rich in social learning content, one can even record and hear spoken stories. Also, e-Learning is not merely technology-aided learning/teaching as is mostly understood but it goes a step further in the sense that the 'e' could also be seen as Enhancing; Enjoyable; and Easily-accessible-learning[9]. The most significant contribution has come from the softwares like 'Moodle' that aids the e-Learning process because the learner can try and retry by the various options provided to them by this software. Within the ambit of

language skills, grammar exercises and its usage has received the greatest boost. A learner can attempt as many times, the same exercise (say in subject-verb agreement or prepositions) to improve the score.

Recently in the English language Proficiency Course at the University of Delhi, the use of e-learning was introduced. It was seen that in four sessions of one hour each, spread over two weeks, the students were made to attempt e-lessons only on prepositions. They were made to keep a record of their scores. They were instructed not to repeat the same exercise more than two times and also made to attempt at least 12-14 exercises. At the end of the fourth session, the students' score displayed a marked improvement. Above all, it was the excitement of using technology, the pictorial quality of the content and in some, the audio input that sustained their interest. Instant results were also the motivating factor. After all, in face-to-face learning, often a teacher takes time to correct the copies of 40-50 students and does it at her/his own pace. Students tend to lose interest.

Joining hands with e-Learning is SLM (self learning materials) an open learning paradigm often called a "teacher in print".[10] As a teacher motivates, teaches and evaluates, so does an SLM. It can also diagnose learner weakness, offer remedial teaching and can also provide enrichment material to high achievers. In distance Learning, the idea of 'distance' actually weighs on the mind and 'learning' is associated with impersonal instruction; it is primarily postal learning.[11] Not really antipodal to distance-Learning, e-Learning provides ways in which it can simultaneously reduce the distance and bring the learner closer home in a collaborative e-Learning environment.

For Developers of e-Learning Courses

An attempt to give a practical shape to create an e-Learning course is given as an example.

1. Needs Analysis / Goals and Objectives

It is true that every learning and teaching emanates from a focused conduct of a needs analysis of the target audience. So, a questionnaire related to the students profile and expectations from such a course can be circulated. This helps in identifying the learning objectives of the course, which could be to equip learners with language in an interactive mode through a web-based e-Learning format.

2. Concept Note and Course Structure

A two-pronged concept and approach can be adopted. Often one comes across learners who wish to improve upon a particular language skill, for example hone up their speaking, grammar or vocabulary exclusively. For such learners separate lessons on the four language skills RWSL, grammar and vocabulary can be created. The other approach is the integrated–learning approach. This approach can make the course a stand alone course not based on any particular language skill or textbook but focused on components of language skills pitched at three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. The next step would be to conceive a course structure, consisting of a number of units, lessons, activities and progress tests.

3. Identification of a Team

At the University of Delhi, the out-sourcing task of creating the on-line content (written material and audio-visual material), was done to its own teachers with the following basic prerequisites: ease with technology, open mindedness to content revision, creativity and imagination, a discipline towards delivery and honesty towards commitments. As a course coordinator, allow a lot of creative freedom to the team. This will result in multi-hued lessons under the broad uniform course structure. Let me illustrate this through some examples. One of the course

writers at Delhi University extensively used her own drawings and self-made graphics like "Mind maps" and "Language maze" as exercises. Before a warm up activity, she introduced a 5-minute "Think on your Own" activity. Similarly, another writer liberally used YouTube, audio-materials like recordings on mobile phones, conversations of the booking windows (movie, railway) to enhance listening skills, crosswords to improve vocabulary and word art (permissions sought) that captured the imagination of the students. In one of her innovative language exercises, she used an AV of the instructions of a flight attendant at a Kingfisher flight to teach an aspect of grammar and speaking skills. Yet another course writer creatively picked everyday situations from her teaching experience to exemplify her lessons. In one of her listening activities on pronunciation, she used the recordings of her own students' pronunciation drill to teach stress and intonation patterns.

4. Choosing the Right Platform/Templates

Globally, many schools and universities use e-*Learning Management Systems* (LMS)[12] of one type or the other to present their e-courses on dedicated websites like MOODLE,[13] many LMS are *open source[14]* and are freely available for installation. This way, the content developers can visualize and adapt the written material, pictures, videos, audios, animations and quizzes to easily fit the LMS templates.

5. Issues of Copyright and Plagiarism

The need for meticulous referencing and acknowledgement of sources should be made clear to content developers before they begin. Generally 'copyleft' licensing like Creative Commons Licensing or GNU Licensing allows one to use and change or customize the material provided there is acknowledgement of source and author. Permission must then be sought from the individual or institution.

6. **Work-in-Progress/Feedback Workshops**

Culturally, hesitation to give a 'feedback' is much implicit in the general 'body politic' of the young in India. Youngsters are brought up to respect older people and seniors, and 'feedback' is understood as unwarranted criticism. In the educational milieu, it is most unstructured and non-evaluative of the teacher's pedagogy as also content. In the e-Learning mode, student feedback is possible and is an effective tool to augment the content too. Devise simple yet penetrating and anonymous feedback forms. So, e-Lessons indeed are like 'unbaked earthen pots' that become effective after they have undergone the dry fire of 'field testing'.[15] Though more and more language scholars today feel that maintaining anonymity in an online feedback is suspect.

7. **Review**

The next tier is an internal review by a senior scholar of the field. Once vetted, the material can be sent for an external review. Now the final copy can be submitted for uploading.

Thus far, I have been arguing that e-Learning is a kind of a cure-all or a sure step towards enhancing language skills. The question of it being a post-modern heterotopia (Srivastava and Kaushik, 2010, p. 2) is a traditional and conservative view of technology-challenged teachers. It looked untenable sometime back as there were many apprehensions related to technology and its accessibility but not today, particularly when two young engineers of this country have just designed laptops worth Rs. 5000 only!

Endnotes

1   Lord Perry, a visionary and bold educator set up the Open University at Milton Keynes, which quickly became a world model. An instructional material that can be delivered on a CD ROM or DVD, on Local Area Network (LAN) or the Internet, e-Learning incorporates media-rich information peppered with multimedia forms of audio and video. Research has shown the several advantages that multimedia offers both in the classroom and in the ODL system (see Mayora, 2006)

2   Dewal O S, "Sharpening the Saw: Developing Faculty Capability for Preparing Self Learning Materials" *Educomm Asia: A Quarterly of the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia* Vol 14 no. 4 June (2009) p.6. (Inaugural Address at the 2nd SLM Development workshop organized by CEMCA and NOIS for the Assam State Open School, at the India International Centre at New Delhi on June 15th 2009)

3   A complete list is provided in the bibliography at the end. However the following are quite helpful. Tony Erben, Ruth Ban, Martha Castaneda (2008). *Teaching English Language Learners through Technology*, Routledge; Naidu Som. *A Guidebook of Principles, Procedures and Practices: E –Learning.* I ed. 2003, 2nd Rev ed 2006 CEMCA, New Delhi.

4   *Fortell* recently published the special issue no.19 on E-Learning in September 2010. It can be viewed at its website: www.fortell.org.

5   Singh S. (2010). "Virtual Learning Environment: Issues and Challenges in Higher Education Domain" *Fortell*, September. Issue 19 p. 12-15.

6   In the recently (March 7-10, 2011) concluded workshop on, 'Digital Distance Education' organized by Osmania University Hyderabad at the Centre for International Programmes, Professor Roger McHaney of Management Information Systems, Kansas State University gave new dimensions to this concept.

7   In February 2010, Professor Penny, conducted a workshop for teachers of English at the University of Delhi, on "Materials Production for Heterogeneous Classes". This analogy was drawn by Professor Rama Mathew of CIE, University of Delhi. Professor Penny Ur is a well known author of ELT books and a teacher trainer at Oranim Academic College of Education, Israel.

8   Venkataraman, G. (2010). "E-Learning: From the Computer to the Classroom" *Fortell*, Sep. Issue 19, p. 6-8.

9   Srivastava P. K. and Kaushik R. (2010). "E-speak from the e-desk" *Fortell*, Sep. Issue 19, p. 2-3.

10 See the note on Dewal. p. 6.

11 In the interview to *Fortell* in 2010 (refer note 1) Professor Malashri Lal spells out the difference between the two.

12 Any LMS is seen as a framework or the underpinning within which e-material is presented. The freely available LMS can be customized to suit the needs of a particular institution, in terms of both appearance and content.

13 MOODLE is the acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, which was developed by a doctoral student from Australia. The Open University UK uses a customised MOODLE for its VLE. Many Universities world-wide use versions of MOODLE.

14 *Open source* is a term that is broadly used to describe software whose source code is made public for others to use and modify as long as the modified version is again freely available. This usually creates a large community of users that upgrade and fix the problems in the software and distribute it freely.

15 Refer note iii, p.6

References

Carneiro Robert and Nascimbeni Fabio. (2007). *eLearning Papers*. No.4, May 2007, 2-7.

Dron J, Mitchell R, Siviter P and Boyne C. (2000). "Website evaluation system: Collaborative discovering what makes a website good". *Proceedings of WebNet,* October.

Mayora, Carlos A. (2006). *English Teaching Forum*, Volume 44, no. 3, 14-20.

Naidu Som. (2003). *A guidebook of principles, procedures and practices: e–learning.* 2nd Rev edn 2006, New Delhi : (CEMCA).

Roe, P. and Richards, K. (1994). *Distance learning in ELT*. Modern English Publications.

Rudestan, Kjell Erik and Schoenholtz-Read Judith (eds.) (2010). Handbook of online learning (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Singh Sanjeev and Dron Jon. (2000). "Networking: A study in cross cultural collaboration." *Journal of Association of Learning Technologies*, ALT-J.

Prototype VLE http://vle.south.du.ac.in

Srivastava P. K. and Kaushik R. (eds.) (2010). "Editorial" *Fortell* special issue on E-Learning, vol.19, September, 1-2.

Tony Erben, Ruth Ban, Martha Castaneda. (2008). *Teaching English language learners through technology.* New York: Routledge.

Prem Kumari Srivastava is an Associate Professor of English at the Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi.

premksri@gmail.com

Call for Papers

Language and Language Teaching (LLT) is a peer-reviewed periodical. It is **not** an *ELT* periodical. It focuses on the theory and practice of language-teaching and English is only one of the languages one might consider. Since there are already many journals devoted to ELT, we particularly welcome articles dealing with other languages.

Papers are invited for the forthcoming issues. Please follow the Guidelines given in the current issue. The references must be complete in ALL respects, and must follow the APA style sheet. Papers may address any aspect of language or language-teaching. They MUST be written in a style that is easily accessible to school teachers, who are the primary target audience of this periodical. The articles may focus on the learner, teacher, materials, teacher training, learning environment, evaluation, or policy issues. Activities focusing on different languages are also invited. The article must be original and should not have been submitted for publication anywhere else. A statement to this effect must be sent along with the article.

No paper should exceed 2500 words including references and the bio-note of the contributor. The bio-note should not exceed 25 words.

Last date for the submission of articles:

January Issue: October 30
July Issue: April 30

Articles may be submitted online simultaneously to the following email IDs:

agniirk@yahoo.com
amrit.l.khanna@gmail.com
jourllt@gmail.com

They may also be posted to:
Vidya Bhawan Society
Fatehpura, Udaipur 313004
Rajasthan, India