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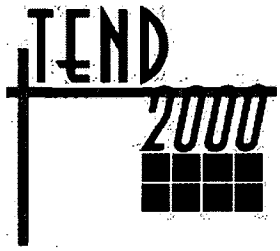
ABSTRACT

Distance learning is not a new phenomenon; online learning is, however, a new, exciting form of distance education. As with all novel ideas, online learning has vehement opponents and supporters, but it is an inevitable step in university instruction. Many online degree and certificate programs are currently available. Adversaries of online learning suggest that the loss of physical interaction will lead to less learning taking place. Another fear is an increased dropout rate due to the lack of self-motivation and time-management skills. An additional concern is that inadequate computer/Internet access renders programs useless. Instructors in traditional universities wish education to continue to be traditional. For the English as a foreign language (EFL) professional, however, an online MA TESOL program negates the arguments discussed and offers additional benefits not found in a traditional university. Time and distance are no longer obstacles to learning. Ideas, questions, and individual discoveries are not restricted to a fixed contact time. Online learning gives students these two educations: in the particular subject matter and in computer skills. Online learning allows for a virtual classroom of students from around the globe who can offer relevant insights into myriad cultures. Unfortunately, for the EFL professional (one of the most relevant candidates for this type of education mode) no such online degree exists. (Contains 22 references.) (YLB)



Crossroads of the New Millennium

Getting Connected: Online Learning For The EFL Professional

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Workshop 2

Abstract

Distance Learning is not a new phenomenon; Online Learning, however, is a new and exciting form of distance education. As with all novel ideas, Online Learning has vehement opponents and supporters but—no one denies—this is an inevitable step in university instruction, and many online degree and certificate programmes are currently available. Adversaries of Online Learning suggest that the loss of physical interaction will lead to less learning taking place. Another fear is an increased dropout rate due to the added self-motivation and time-management skills required of this learning method. There is additional concern that inadequate computer/Internet access will render programmes moot. In general, instructors who teach in traditional universities wish education to continue to be traditional. For the EFL professional, however, an online MA TESOL programme negates the arguments discussed and offers additional benefits not found in a traditional university. Unfortunately, for the EFL professional—one of the most relevant candidates for this type of education mode—no such online degree exists.

Getting Connected: Online Learning for the EFL Professional

Distance Learning, in general, is defined as education which "takes place when a teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance, and technology (i.e., voice, video, data, and print), often in concert with face-to-face communication, is used to bridge the instructional gap" (Lazo "Overview"). It is not a new idea. For more than a century, Distance Learning has allowed busy professionals, whose schedules prevented them from taking regular classes, to continue their education. For many Americans, independent study is a noble endeavor exemplified by Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford.

In 1892, Penn State University, through the Rural Free Delivery, "delivered courses and agricultural knowledge to rural families" (*History*). Supposedly, Penn State's system was modeled on extension courses offered even earlier by Oxford and Cambridge Universities. These types of extension courses, still extremely common, entailed long queues at the post office—manila envelopes stuffed with course packets, assignments, responses, homework, etc. Depending on location, it might take as long to receive an initial syllabus as it would to complete a class in a traditional university. A few decades later, in 1917, the University of Wisconsin-Madison took the first steps in designing distance learning by radio (Gooch).

However, it is generally presumed that Distance Learning did not enjoy universal awareness until Britain's Open University opened in 1970. According to the university, in 1997 alone enrollment was greater than 165,000 students, paying 75 million pounds in fees. The British school recently forged an alliance with Western Governors University—a virtual university that offers students access to Online Distance courses provided by a range of institutions based in the United States (Goddard).

There is no question that, for a variety of reasons, Online Distance Learning will be an educational reality. Lifelong learning has become an imperative in today's society. A 1995 study of working adults in 48 US states by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Centre at Washington State University found that "81% of those surveyed think that getting additional education is important for them to be successful. Seventy-two percent think that, given the realities of the lives of working adults, distance education methods offer an

important means of meeting their needs for continuing education (Almeda). According to University of California Extension, which opened its "doors" in 1996, students "select online courses because of family obligations, job pressures or travel, physical limitations, or lack of local educational institutions" (Almeda).

Perhaps the earliest online course was developed at The School of Management and Strategic Studies at the Western Behavioural Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California in 1981 (Feenberg). Considering the exponential growth of computer technology since then, one can easily conclude that this was, at best, a difficult venture—fraught with complex computer operations and abysmally slow modems. Yet, according to Andrew Feenberg, a member of the design team that created the programme, "Students and teachers contributed literally hundreds of highly intelligent comments to our computer conferences each month. The quality of these online discussions surpassed anything I have ever been able to stimulate in my face-to-face classrooms." One would suspect, then, that Online Distance Learning would be embraced by educators around the world, additionally seen as a panacea to solve the problem of increasing college enrollments without the comparable growth in classrooms.

In large part, this has not happened. Opponents of Online Distance Learning cite a number of complaints with this new trend in education. The biggest of these is that the loss of physical interaction between professor and classmates will lead to less learning taking place. Another fear is an increased dropout rate due to the added self-motivation and time-management skills required of Online Distance Education. Finally, traditional universities are filled with traditional instructors. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, traditional is defined as "Observant of, *bound by* tradition" (italics added). Thus, novel ideas and programmes are greeted with disrespect, intolerance, and a general dragging-of-feet. Other, less esoteric, concerns include intellectual property rights, taxation, tuition discrepancies, and the lack of computer/Internet access. In general, opponents of Online Distance Learning have adopted the pose succinctly stated by David F. Noble, a history professor at York University in Toronto and one of the leading adversaries of the mode, "It's another step . . . toward the sanctioning of a degraded education system." He refers to the colleges and universities who have heralded in this new method of teaching as "digital diploma mills" (qtd. in Feenberg).

In defense of Online Distance Learning, I will now address each of these complaints. Research comparing distance education to traditional face-to-face instruction indicates that "teaching and studying at a distance can be as effective as traditional instruction, when the method and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, there is student-to-student interaction, and when there is timely teacher-to-student feedback" (qtd. in Lazo "Overview"). More current research continually yields the same results. In a study done at Southwest Missouri State University using a control group (traditional classroom learning) and an experimental group (online classroom), researchers found no significant difference between the test scores of the two groups. Further, "general observations supported that students in the experimental group had a more positive feeling about their experience than the control group" (Wegner). Conversely, but as satisfying, other research suggest "Achievement on various tests administered by course instructors tends to be higher for distant as opposed to traditional students (qtd. in Lazo "Research"), yet no significant difference in positive attitudes toward course material is apparent between distant and traditional education (qtd. in Lazo "Research")."

Proponents of Online Distance Learning recognise that this mode is not appropriate for everyone; indeed, many students do not possess the self-motivation required for this type of learning. The lack of these characteristics are, in large part, responsible for the higher dropout rates noted in some studies. However, since the focus of this paper is on the ELT professional, whose behaviour, drives, and focus differ quite radically from learners in other disciplines, problems of self-motivation should not be an issue. I will, however, return to this issue when I discuss the MA-TESOL programme.

As to the notion of tradition, I certainly cannot express this better than what Martin Van Buren, governor of New York, wrote in 1829: "The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as 'railroads.' As you may well know, railroad carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 miles an hour by engines, which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed."

According to David Jaffee,

[Online Classes] for many faculty . . . represents a radical departure from prevailing practice that is incongruous with their understanding of the essential nature of teaching and learning. . . . Within educational organisations the classroom has taken on the status of a sacred institution. The classroom is a physical location, containing a fairly standardised set of props and objects that carry symbolic meaning. The classroom is also a social institution—a value and norm-laden contextual milieu—that assigns role obligations, expectations, and differential status to the human participants. When organisational practices like classroom teaching are deeply institutionalised, and combine both material and symbolic features, they are especially immune to transformation.

While I will not delve into the economic concerns at issue in Online Learning, I would like to address the fear of insufficient computer/Internet access. Thirty years ago there were three computers that could be directly reached through the Internet. As of January, 1999, that number was 43.2 million, and it is expected to increase to 100 million worldwide by 2001 (Hankin 18). Another source (Shrivastava 692) put the number at over 200 million users in 1999. In 1998, electronic commerce accounted for $27.4 billion; it is expected to grow to $978.4 billion by 2003 (Hankin 18). The *1993 Peterson's Distance Learning Guide* listed 93 cyber-colleges, while the 1997 edition counted 762. Obviously the market exists which suggests that access exists. In fact, last year, Jones International University, which has no campus and holds classes only in cyberspace, received accreditation from the North Central Association on Institutions of Higher Education (the same body which accredits the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago). Jones International is a for-profit organisation that would not have gone through the lengthy, rigorous process of accreditation if there were only a few students with computer/Internet access. Obviously, most of this computer access is available in highly developed countries. However, developing countries are leap-frogging into the computer/Internet arena with dazzling speed.

Finally, the opponents of Online Distance Learning have not reasonably looked at the myriad of other benefits this mode offers. Among the benefits noted by research of web-based learning environments in Singapore (Singapore Masterplan for IT in Education—a blueprint for the integration of information technology in education as a strategy to meet the challenges

of the 21st century), chief among these boons is that time and distance are no longer an obstacle to learning; that is, it provides a time-of-convenience and place-of-convenience opportunity for student-student contact and student-instructor contact (Teh 398). This is important because, according to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), nontraditional and returning students now account for the majority of students in higher education (Feenberg). Many of these students work and require course schedules different from the traditional ones to which most full-time faculty are attached (Feenberg).

Further, "ideas, questions, and individual discoveries are not restricted to the one-hour or two-hour contact time of the standard tutorial session"; using web searches allows students to go beyond traditional library research (on current optic transmission lines, the Library of Congress' entire collection of books could be transmitted in just over five minutes [Hankin 19]); web classes are built by participation, thus fostering teamwork and co-operation; guest experts worldwide can be called upon to assist in the discussions; and, inclusion of literary citations in hypertext can be done quickly (Teh 398).

Additionally, the asynchronous component of Online Learning allows for more thought provoking responses; "some people do not do well in spontaneous spoken interaction, but turn out to have valuable contributions to make in a conversation in which they have time to think about what to say" (qtd. in Rogers). Because physical presence is not necessary, "the ability of those with slight to severe emotional restrictions and debilities—shyness, stuttering, lack of confidence, deafness, immobility, blindness—have the opportunity to interact in a virtual community" (Rogers).

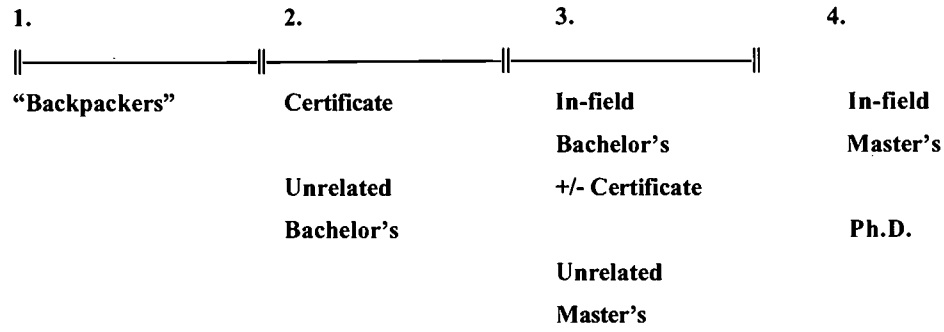
A major component of Web Based Instruction is required student interaction—most classroom curricula do not require this level of intercommunication. In general, online learning communities are learner centred; in contrast, most traditional classrooms are instructor centred. Another benefit is that students can view the lecture as often as necessary—an impossibility in a traditional classroom. Research also definitively illustrates that, both qualitatively and quantitatively, student-instructor communication is enhanced in the Online Learning Environment.

Perhaps most importantly, Online Learning gives students two educations: 1) the particular subject matter, and 2) computer skills that are imperative in this age. The latter should not come as a surprise to anyone; clearly, computer/Internet technology is daily becoming a necessity in our global culture. That a substantial majority of all US colleges and universities require all students to take courses in Information Technology illustrates this awareness. According to Management professor Paul Shrivastava, "The emergence of the digital economy is fundamentally changing the way businesses are organised and managed. Electronic commerce, the Internet, and the World Wide Web (WWW) are the core technologies of the digital economy. They are reshaping the way every business management function is conducted in organisations" (691). His comments, while directed at the specific field of management, are quickly becoming true for every facet of our lives.

The growing number of colleges and universities that currently offer completely online degrees and certifications illustrates the reality of the future in higher education. Unfortunately, one programme seems to have been overlooked—the TESOL/TEFL graduate programme. If this oversight is not remedied soon, the future of the profession will be diminished, and ESL/EFL students will pay the greatest price.

It is first necessary to look at the different types of teaching positions and the different types of teachers vis-a-vis teaching English to non-native speakers. The first chasm is between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). English language teaching, which occurs in a country where English is the official or most commonly accepted language, is called ESL; whereas, English language teaching, which occurs in a country where English is not the official language, is called EFL. In today's global market, where English is the unofficial lingua franca, both groups are in great demand. However, according to a recent article in the *TESOL Quarterly*, most of the English language learning is occurring in non-English speaking countries. It is estimated, for example, that from 750 million to one and a half billion people worldwide use the English language, and only 300 million of these are native speakers (qtd. in Vandrick 403). For the remainder of this paper, then, I would like to concentrate on the EFL profession.

EFL teachers can be categorised into several groups along a continuum. The first group is comprised of native speakers with no formal background in the teaching position and who have no educational credentials; they are often referred to as "backpackers" who are merely looking for a way to subsidise their desire to live in a foreign culture (this does not mean to suggest that they are all abysmal teachers). A more dedicated group is comprised of those who have completed some sort of certificate programme in teaching English as a foreign language (e.g. RSA, Trinity, Cambridge) and those who have a Bachelor's degree in a field unrelated to English language teaching (i.e. mathematics). Further up the spectrum are those who have a Bachelor's degree in field, often supplemented by a certificate, and Master's degree holders in unrelated fields, sometimes supplemented by a certificate. At the far end of the continuum are teachers with Master's and Ph.D. degrees in field.



Groups one and two generally work in private language institutes that do not have any accreditation concerns, although the latter group may also teach in public primary and secondary schools. Group four is teaching in universities either in their home country or abroad. However, the profile of group three is the most problematic in terms of job possibilities.

Many of these groups' members are dedicated professionals who truly wish to make a substantial impact on students in their EFL classrooms. Some of them start off in private language institutes or public schools below the tertiary level. Others find college/university positions in economically strapped cultures that cannot afford the salaries of appropriately educated and experienced instructors. In Hungary, for example, where I taught in the English department of a Teacher Training College, one of the three native English speakers in the department held a Master's degree in psychology and had no teaching background. The

second native English speaker had a Bachelor's degree in field and several years' of EFL teaching experience—although none at the tertiary level. Although the College's hiring standards demanded higher credentials, and the head of the English department was dedicated to a professional staff, the reality was that there were few qualified applicants for a position which paid approximately $US 200 per month. One might suggest that an instructor who would work for this comparatively low salary surely must be dedicated to the teaching profession. If this is true, it is certainly our obligation to assist these instructors in better preparing them for the college level EFL classroom.

There are other EFL instructors who seek professional development—for personal reasons or to climb the rungs of the teaching ladder and find a, more coveted, college/university position—positions which require a Master's degree in ESOL, Multi-Cultural Education, Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics, or English Language Teaching. These teachers got their feet wet in the classroom and found great personal and professional satisfaction, fell in love with their new culture, and/or decided that the expatriate lifestyle was what they wanted. This group, in terms of real world skills, is already, in many ways, better prepared than MA TESOL holders who have studied in the US but have not, yet, experienced teaching in a foreign culture. "The situations abroad could be shockingly different and much more demanding than what are perceived as ESL or EFL situations in many training programmes in the U.S" (Govardhan 116).

According to a recent TESOL colloquium, panelists discussing EFL classes voiced concerns over "large classes (ranging from 50 to 150), lack of teaching aids, un(der)trained local teachers with low English proficiency, lack of appropriate textbooks and teaching resources, unfamiliar educational bureaucracies, antiquated examination systems, and lack of congruence between the educational ideologies and practices of the visitors and hosts" (Govardhan 116). The purpose of my paper is not to attack the problems with US MA TESOL programmes but, rather, to find a way to effectively train current EFL teachers who have already come face-to-face with the realities mentioned within the colloquium and have successfully adapted to a different teaching environment, but who need to supplement their experience with educational qualifications.

It is certainly true that traditional MA TESOL programmes exist all over the world; the Canadian hogwan (private language institute) teacher in Korea can find an MA programme in a Seoul university. But what if she is not in Seoul but in a small village? What if the classes conflict with her teaching schedule? What can she do if many of the learning aids are in Korean because the programme is geared to non-native English speakers? I believe that an online MA TESOL programme would be a viable, effective solution for her.

I do not wish to suggest that an online programme is appropriate for all, and the issues I am raising are geared to one specific group: native English speakers who are living in a non-English speaking country. Further, I do not think my idea is far-fetched, unreasonable, or unworkable. To support my belief, Newport Asia Pacific University in Japan recently began to offer an MS TESOL degree to be completed, virtually, online (two 4-day sessions in Tokyo are required). The leader of this programme is David Nunan, world-renowned linguist and specialist in the field of TESOL.

As already mentioned, critics of online learning point to several difficulties for students when compared to the traditional, face-to-face classroom. I do not wish to suggest they are wrong in their assessments; rather, these difficulties are the same ones that a classroom teacher needs to learn to overcome. Thus, even theoretical material is enhanced by practical experience in the online environment. Self-motivation, dedication, and the ability to study independently are integral components of successful online learning; likewise, these skills are imperative for successful teaching.

Further, according to a suggested preparatory programme to teach English abroad, a necessary element of an MA TESOL programme should include "units that enhance the teachers' geographical and anthropological literacy and respect for other countries and communities, their cultures, their educational systems, and their conditions and ethics of work, including those that provide the sociocultural flexibility to cope with unfamiliar living and working conditions" (Govardhan 123). Online learning allows for a virtual classroom of students from around the globe who can offer relevant insights into myriad cultures. According to John Bigelow, "The diversity of students in a course can constitute a valuable learning resource,

particularly when addressing teambuilding, cultural, international, or equal opportunity topics" (637)

In addition to the in-field professional development available through this medium, other benefits abound. For example, computer and Internet abilities will be developed and enhanced. For future EFL teachers who are studying in an education department of a traditional university, these abilities may not be accumulated. While many academic disciplines require these skills of their students, education majors are still lacking this component. According to a survey prepared by the International Society for Technology in Education, gathered from 416 institutions representing approximately 90,000 graduates per year, teacher education programmes 'should increase teachers' exposure to appropriate education technology if they are to aptly prepare them for today's classroom." Further, the majority of education faculty members "revealed that they do not, in fact, practice or model effective technology use in their classrooms" (*Teacher*).

Alone, these results are shocking when we consider that, according to Cheryl Lemke, "today's students live in a global, knowledge-based age, and they deserve teachers whose practice embraces the best that technology can bring to learning" (qtd. in *Teacher*). When we also consider the vast number of computer/Internet resources available to non-native English language learners, it behooves us to make sure that classroom teachers have the ability to assist their students in accessing these sources. This is not "breaking news"; colleges and universities around the world are increasingly requiring computer skills as a condition of employment.

Let's consider a recent advertisement posted by the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), our host for this conference, and see how a candidate who is engaged in an online MA TESOL programme might fare. Minimum requirements included:

1) BA plus TESOL diploma
2) Three years teaching experience (preferably at the tertiary level)
3) CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) experience
4) Experience in curriculum development and student assessment.

An analysis of each of these prerequisites will help to compare our candidate, "Ken," with other applicants. Requirements 1 and 2 are often incongruous unless we consider the scenario I mentioned above (see Chart)—Bachelor's degree holders teaching in a country that cannot afford to hire more professionally trained (i.e. graduate degree holders) instructors. With the exception of this situation, it is virtually impossible to possess only a Bachelor's degree and to have the opportunity to teach at the tertiary level (as mentioned before, a motivating factor for enrolling in an MA programme). Requirement 4 is a bit ambiguous; experience in curriculum development and student assessment can be attained at the primary or secondary school level, or even at a private language institute. Requirement 3 illustrates that HCT recognises the importance of the computer medium in the acquisition of English language skills. Based on the huge amount of work and money involved in hosting a conference of this size, it is further clear that HCT promotes and encourages professional development.

Let's now look at "Ken's" background.. He is currently teaching in a college in Ecuador, where his dedication to education and his Bachelor's degree in English earned him a position three years ago. During his tenure, he has participated in committees involved with improving testing validity and reliability and has created several new courses designed to encourage and interest students in learning English. Further, last year he began an online MA TESOL programme. Would HCT be interested in his application and potential as an HCT instructor? I believe so. Not only is his experience and education concurrent with HCT's requirements, but the computer savvy and comfortability he is gaining through online learning will be passed to his students. "Ken" also exemplifies an educator who continues to keep abreast in the field of English Language Teaching and is committed to professional development.

While online MA TESOL programmes are not for everyone, they are remarkably relevant for the dedicated educator seeking a tertiary teaching position. Unfortunately, except for Dr. Nunan's programme, no programmes currently exist. Although the novelty of a new teaching method is frightening and overwhelming, we must remember that classroom instruction—what we now refer to as "traditional" learning—is, itself, a relatively recent form of pedagogy. As this third millenium begins to blossom, we should consider that the common form of learning in the second millenium was through apprenticeship. Yet, classroom learning

burgeoned in the last millenium, and virtual classrooms must burgeon in this millenium. According to Dr. Shrivastava, "the important point is to make the commitment to develop online learning not as an experiment of one or two or a few courses, but as a mainstream mode of delivering learning" (693).

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