

No substitute for the real thing: the future of online learning, a virtual reality check

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***Abstract:** This paper presents a brief overview of how computers and the Internet are affecting language and language learning, and draws attention to certain currently discernible disadvantages and limitations. While conceding that, at the current rate of technological development, most if not all of these problems will be alleviated in the near future, the author maintains that they will never be entirely eliminated and will preclude the development of the "virtual classroom" as an alternative to face-to-face instruction. The author also makes a brief defence of traditional teaching modes and concludes that in the future online learning should be complementary to the overall process in much the same way as previous "technological revolutions" (e.g. television and radio) are incorporated today.*

Introduction: CALL and the emergence of the "virtual classroom"

In 1994, one head of department at a British secondary school described

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Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as "the 90s equivalent of the language laboratory- overpriced for the benefit it brings, unreliable and alienating" (Gray, 1997: 58). It seems unlikely that such analogies, if indeed they are still pertinent today, will continue to apply for very much longer. Over the past decade, the explosive growth of the Internet has overcome conservative intransigence and created a very real demand for the incorporation of computers in the general learning process. Quite simply, it is now inconceivable for any student at any learning institution in Japan or any other developed nation to be learning without the assistance of computers. Indeed, the "virtual classroom" has already moved out of the realm of science fiction and is steadily gaining ground as future objective and, if the hype is to be believed, perhaps even future norm. There is therefore little doubt that the Internet will have a profound effect upon language teaching- the question is *how* and to *what effect*. This essay constitutes an attempt to address those questions by identifying the future implications for language learning and for the development of the English language. Given the symbiotic nature of the relationship between our Internet-reliant information society and English (the *lingua franca* of that society) this essay will naturally assume that a degree of amalgamation in the classroom is both appropriate and inevitable. Nevertheless, this essay also presents a brief analysis of those benefits peculiar to real (as opposed to distance) classroom learning, and contends that future technological achievements should not and will not culminate in the exclusion of face-to-face classroom interaction.

What advances in online learning can we expect in the foreseeable future? By examining today's state of the art technology, we may identify

several areas in which continued development will almost undoubtedly contribute to the range and effectiveness of the Internet as an educational facility. Computers will become lighter and more specialised in terms of their capacities as an educational tool. Web pages will continue to proliferate; modems will become faster; providers will offer better and cheaper service; artificial interlocutors ("Chatterbots") will improve. Essentially unlimited bandwidth will make real time audio interaction commonplace. The scope for collaborative learning via online publishing will be enhanced by easier-to-create home pages and Web sites. The overall effect of these innovations will be to render online learning faster, more reliable, more personalised, more portable, more commonplace and cheaper. The latter point will be crucial in determining whether online learning will actually ever become the preferred mode of education around the world.

Back to the future: limitations, problems and the regressive nature of online learning

How the Internet affects the language learning process in the immediate future will be largely determined by the challenges it faces today. Technological limitations which until very recently were acting as a brake on online learning have been largely overcome. Broadly speaking, these deficiencies affected three main areas- speed, stability and the provision of synchronous audio/visual interaction. In pedagogic terms, this entailed wasted study time, missed deadlines and a lack of immediate feedback, real-time conversation and fast-drill practice. Though the success of learning programs such as Online Video English (www.video-english.com) have now proved that these problems were always surmountable, each

technological advance has brought with it new challenges. The popularisation of cheap, reliable, synchronous audio-communication has, for example, brought issues relating to time-zone differences and site supervision to the fore. Furthermore, and as recently as 2003, a study of the impact of computer technology in the U.S. returned the verdict that it is still "far too complex and error prone to be smoothly integrated into most classrooms" (Oppenheimer. 2003: 437). Nevertheless, the inexorable trend is clearly towards language learning institutions at least having the potential to create the virtual classrooms alluded to above.

At the end of the nineties, the Internet was still widely regarded as a medium which, by itself, was incapable of taking the learner beyond Van Ek's "Threshold level" (Murray, 1999: 3). Nevertheless, this type of evaluation only ever served to qualify the nature of its application to language learning. As a source of information and "real language in use" the Internet has always been capable of contributing to learner development at any level, and by long-standing popular consensus is most effective when used in conjunction with other mediums. Numa Markee's 1999 account of online learning at The University of Illinois ("one of the most "wired" in the U.S.") is illustrative of how the Internet's limitations initially defined its role as complementary tool rather than alternative. Though this subordinate role was reflective of inadequate speaking practice or oral interaction capacities, the intention at Illinois was always to limit online learning to grammar and vocabulary, the premise being that this would then allow the university to maximise "more important" face-to-face time (Bowers, 99: 303). Five years on, and for reasons referred to below, improvements in speed, stability and synchronicity have not yet substantially altered the *status*

quo. Furthermore, it is the contention of this essay that an element of real face-to-face interaction will always be desirable in any learning context, regardless of that point at which technological advances, monetary funds and know-how combine to render it no longer essential.

So what are the drawbacks of the virtual classroom, and how is it deficient in terms of language learning? The most commonly cited reasons for not entirely turning students over to their computers are listed below:

- Lack of real face-to-face interaction/ no tactile element to communication
- Risk of technical problems and glitches
- Need for round-the-clock technical support
- Teachers need to be retrained in order to develop the skills necessary to become effective online instructors
- Increased workload: teachers are often required to develop the system, move traditional content online, reassess evaluation criteria and spend longer providing individualized feedback
- Increased course costs relative to traditional modes of learning
- Equipment needs of the students
- Non-provision of many of the social aspects of a traditional campus or classroom
- Requires new skills and responsibilities from learners
- Inequity of learner-access due to socioeconomic and technological disparities

(Adapted from justcolleges.com, 2004)

Though technological advances may serve to alleviate all of these problems in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that any will be eradicated as a point

of legitimate concern.

Making the world a smaller-minded place: computers and cultural elitism

The final drawback listed above refers to the apparently obvious point that the Internet will have little or no impact on language learning in those regions of the world largely untouched by it. Despite exponential growth in the number of host computers, the Internet revolution has thus far been a very American-centric, first-world affair. At the turn of the millennium, only one percent of the world's users were operating outside of the U.S., Europe, Australia and Japan (Graus, 1999: 9). This polarisation shows no signs of abating and has resulted in "a new information elitism which further disenfranchises the majority of the world's population" (*ibid.*:10). Even in regions with Internet access, the costs involved for online learning courses based in the developed world are very often prohibitive. Financial concerns also raise issues of compatibility, with older computers effectively becoming obsolete if unable to run the latest software. It is an unfortunate fact that online learning will not only continue to make the world a smaller place, it will also serve to still further exacerbate its divisions.

The fact that the Internet has been successfully used to link learners from around the world has rendered online learning largely synonymous with "intercultural learning". This enormous potential brings with it certain challenges and responsibilities. Chief among these is how to devise a "culture-sensitive pedagogy" (Holliday, 1994, cited in Shahidullah, 1999: 3) capable of accommodating a seemingly irreconcilable array of schemata and preconceptions. According to Vygotsky, an appropriate

"ethnomethodology" incorporating learner needs, expectations and familiar conceptual models is essential if effective learning is to be facilitated and learner withdrawal averted (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Shahidullah, 1999: 6). The implications for online learning are as obvious as they are daunting—provide "blanket-coverage" for those learners with a specific cultural orientation (i.e. everyone) or die. I would suggest, however, that efforts to devise this all-encompassing ethnomethodology are unnecessary and even undesirable. By its very nature, the Internet spans cultures— it does not discriminate. This is reflective of the fact that cultures are dynamic, interwoven entities. The Internet has a responsibility to present them on their own terms in order to facilitate greater understanding, empathy and cross-cultural communicative ability. The "shared conceptual framework and consequent discourse" identified by Mavor and Trayner as a prerequisite to successful communication (1999: 5) is not something to be imposed from above. Rather it is a goal to work towards through undiluted cultural interaction.

Using English to study the Internet: the impact on how and what we learn

Another topic of concern pertaining to the dissemination of potentially corrupting material concerns the Internet's resemblance to a vast, accessible and almost totally unsupervised library. While it is unlikely that designers of language learning materials will ever distribute their work for free on any more than a piecemeal basis, the World Wide Web has enormous potential as a resource. A problem faced by learners, however, is how to avoid "information overload" and discriminate between relevant

material and insignificant or undesirable "factoids". According to Kluge, "there has been a loss of reliable authority" necessitating greater critical reading skills such as skimming and scanning (1997: 32). The irony is that the Internet will increasingly reinforce reading skills in an age "when it was imagined that an oral culture based on television and telephones would reduce the role of the written word" (Vallance, 1998: 40). The Internet will also have the beneficial effect of not only collapsing the distance between authentic and created materials, but of also allowing teachers to "personalise" classes according to specific needs and interests.

The future development and expansion of online learning will also have implications for the type of language that is practiced and therefore learnt. This will paradoxically entail changes in the English language brought about by a tool designed to practice it. Despite its current preoccupation with written English, online learning is already synonymous with the practice and production of "natural" as opposed to "textbook" language (Graus, 1999: 44). The changes effected by the Internet will, however, amount to more than an emphasis on the colloquial and accelerated Americanisation. As Mavor and Trayner have pointed out, "information literacy- the ability to find, organise and make use of information...also encompasses how to read and write in (the) new medium" (Mavor and Trayner, 1999: 6). Online learning will therefore necessitate the learning of new linguistic skills likely to involve a reduced dialect with an emphasis on meaning over accuracy.

Despite the possibility of online learning being incorporated into classroom time, the usual implication is that the learner is physically remote from both the teacher and other students. There is, therefore, a

shift towards learner-autonomy that is entirely compatible with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Nevertheless, on an individual basis, the effectiveness of the Internet as a language learning tool greatly depends upon the learner's self-reliance and self-discipline. If properly exploited, the Internet will facilitate a shift in education "from "being told" to "exploration" with a much deeper understanding as a result" (Van Assche, 1998, cited in Graus, 1999: 21). The reverse side of the equation should not, however, be ignored. Imbuing the learner with more responsibility than he or she is either willing or able to accept runs the risk of alienation and non-participation. Clearly the lack of personal interaction synonymous with online learning creates an even greater need for personalised course evaluation and feedback.

Booting up and switching off: acknowledging the personal factor

The cumulative effect of this learner-empowerment and opportunity for "real" cross-cultural communication is often referred to as "motivating" and therefore conducive to online-learning's future expansion (e.g. Graus, 1999: 21). There is, however, some evidence to the contrary. According to Windeat, learners are no more motivated by one medium than any other (Windeat, 1986: 86, cited in Vallance, 1998: 38) and "technophobes" may be overtly hostile to online learning. This would certainly seem to be borne out by Cuban's survey of educational institutions in the U.S. where he found that "less than five percent of teachers integrated computer technology into their curriculum", and of those that did, "the overwhelming majority... employed the technology to sustain existing patterns of teaching rather

than to innovate" (Cuban, 2001: 133-134). Furthermore, there have been reports of a "motivation-dip" phenomenon following "the initial flush of enthusiasm for the new media" (Fanselow, J., recounted in Bowers, 1999: 305). The "motivation factor" cannot therefore be taken for granted by proponents of online learning. I would suggest that the challenge is how to sustain enthusiastic learner participation in the learning process, and that the solution once again lies in complementing the Internet with other media.

When contemplating the use of the Internet for language learning, certain disadvantages (e.g. the investment in time and money) will have to be weighed up and measured in terms of anticipated benefits. It is therefore the responsibility of all teachers to objectively evaluate online learning. Personal prejudice (derived usually from a lack of familiarity with the medium) should not be a feature of this evaluation. A recurrent problem, even at institutions that have invested heavily in INTALL (Internet Assisted Language Learning), is of machines lying idle or not being used to their full potential due to a lack of expertise on the part of teachers (Markee, recounted in Bowers, 1999: 304. Gray, 1996: 60). Another risk at the opposite end of the spectrum is of technophile language teachers teaching *about* rather than *with* computers and the Internet. Appropriate, regular training/refreshment courses for teachers are clearly necessary if online learning is to be exploited to its full potential.

Conclusion: presenting online learning, with our complements

To conclude, the Internet will undoubtedly have a profound effect upon the learning of English in the coming years. The medium itself is producing

permanent socioeconomic change and it is the responsibility of education as a whole to respond. In order to perform within this altered society, communicative and information competence will become increasingly essential. The juxtaposition of the language and the medium in the classroom is therefore entirely appropriate. The drawbacks alluded to in this essay are practical and mainly transitory, and are in any case outweighed by the potential advantages. Far more pertinent is the issue of whether computers actually bring any real or discernible benefit at all regarding academic achievement. Though we tend to glibly assume that online learning automatically engenders better learning, hard statistical proof of this equation has so far eluded researchers (Cuban, 2001: 133). Furthermore, the future of the virtual classroom as a reputable source of information, motivational tool and alternative educational environment is, as we have seen, by no means clear-cut. The need for complementation is therefore accepted, especially in language learning given the current inability of the Internet to adequately provide the crucial element of face-to-face interaction. I would further suggest that the most serious limitation affecting online learning *per se* has nothing to do with its intrinsic nature. Rather, it is the question of how it will be uniformly applied in a politically and economically divided world.

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