

## E-LEARNING: THE FABLED ALADDIN'S LAMP?

### Resumo

Um dos frutos do rápido desenvolvimento das novas tecnologias de informação e comunicação é o e-learning, considerado actualmente como uma nova opção a juntar-se às metodologias 'mais clássicas' no ensino tradicional. De facto, o e-learning aparece-nos como uma metodologia 'alternativa' que facilita a aquisição contínua de conhecimentos e competências nos mais múltiplos contextos de aprendizagem.

Este artigo não pretende sugerir que o e-learning venha substituir o ensino tradicional; pretende, sim, mostrar que o e-learning tem o potencial para ser uma metodologia complementar em geral, e também para o ensino das línguas estrangeiras na FLUL. Propõem-se aqui respostas a algumas das questões mais frequentes:

- Qual é a diferença entre o ensino/aprendizagem presencial e online?
- Que competências da língua estrangeira podem ser desenvolvidas num curso de e-learning?
- Como se desenvolve um curso online?
- Quais são as características de um curso online?
- Como é feita a avaliação no e-learning?

Esta reflexão resulta de um trabalho que tenho vindo a desenvolver no projecto e-learning do Instituto Nacional de Administração cuja equipa produziu um curso e-learning: "Presenting in English".

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E-learning has rapidly become the new buzzword in both corporate training and higher education programmes. Major international companies and universities which embrace technology as a means of innovating course delivery have been testing the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning over traditional teaching methods. As is common to any introduction of change in teaching paradigm, there are different opinions about the adoption of e-learning and its effectiveness as a teaching practice. The sceptics, Hase and Ellis (2001:28), view the “headlong rush to deliver educational programmes online” as moved by “economics, fascination with technology and pedagogy”, but question “which of these is the primary incentive”.

For the enthusiasts, having an e-learning programme is like possessing the fabled Aladdin’s lamp, which is the key to a profound revolution in learning, because it represents, as Rosenberg (2001:7) puts it, “delivery solutions that meet [learner’s] needs and time frames [where learning is a continuous cultural process which transcends the classroom and is] available on a 24/7 clock”, whilst taking into account individual learning styles. Salmon (2000:88) goes as far as to suggest that,

more learners will soon receive all or part of their education or training online ... many of those institutions that stick firmly to face-to-face or print-based teaching systems are unlikely to be in the field for much longer.

On a more sober note, Sloman (2001), Palloff and Pratt (2001) acknowledge, but are not blinded by, the growing appeal of technology (which they regard as a tool, not a strategy). They address the challenges that teachers will face as they move through a transformation from face-to-face teaching to online teaching and promote social constructivism as a critical success factor for e-learning. These authors offer practical guidelines for developing and delivering online courses that ease teachers into this new medium and assure cohesion in course material development. In a recent article, Figueira (2003) warns online course developers about the dangers of being seduced by the functionality of the technology and reinforces the need to focus on adequate content and methodology.

From whatever angle authors choose to look at e-learning, most agree that it has become the *de facto* solution for distance learning whereby remote students can either access a virtual classroom in real time or access course content at their own convenience and learn at their own pace and place, depending on the e-learning framework used.

Synchronous learning allows for the tutor to deliver a Power Point presentation, for example, in real time, from his/her computer at home

while the logged-on remote student sees the material and listens to the session from a web browser. Students can speak with the tutor and their colleagues via a PC microphone or they can also send written messages to each other. The main disadvantage of this model of learning is that, no matter how carefully planned it may be, a synchronous session can be jeopardised by unexpected technological pitfalls in the national telecommunication system which connects the computers to a server either through local area networks or through modem and telephone lines.

The asynchronous learning environment, as Sloman (2001), Palloff and Pratt (2001) define it, places emphasis on the learner's acceptance of responsibility and ownership for learning. In Sloman's (2001:113) words, it "considers how the learner transforms information, generates hypotheses and makes decisions about the content and knowledge". In asynchronous discussion, "students can read material on their own time schedules, ... search out new, additional sources to complement what is being studied ... and reflect on the material presented by the instructor and the peers", with the added bonus of having time to think about issues before adding their own contributions.

All this pre-ambule has not answered the question about the suitability of e-learning for teaching foreign languages. The truth of the matter is that, although FL courses are already being offered online (by organisations like the Spanish – based Englishtown, for example), Stephenson (2001:x) reminds us that "the medium itself is too young for any satisfactory evaluative longitudinal study to have been completed and is still evolving rapidly".

When INA<sup>1</sup> set up an e-learning project in 2001, I was part of the group of FL teachers<sup>2</sup> developing online English and French courses. We were just as eager to develop online instructional design skills as to answer questions about pedagogy, methodology and course content. The process of building a course from scratch, with absolutely no reference of previous work done to draw on, posed an immense challenge not only in course design, but also in content development. In the end, we realised that learning by doing may be more time-consuming but it is very rewarding because, as our work progressed, we began to see our questions answered and our worries dissipated in that e-learning does allow for communication and student/student and student/tutor interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Leite Monteiro developed "Writing Professional Letters and E-mails"; Paula Horta and Susan Leite Monteiro developed "Presenting in English"; and Colette Guillot Costa developed "Rédiger des lettres professionnelles"

### The difference between online teaching/learning

It seemed clear to us that both online teachers and students need to make a mind-shift to this new medium of teaching/learning. How big a shift needs to be made, though? Palloff and Pratt (2000:3) stress the importance of moving beyond traditional models of pedagogy, where students used to be viewed as “*blank slates*, whose minds could be filled with information” into a constructivist model which “holds that students, through their interaction with one another, the instructor, and their environment, create knowledge and meaning”. Most FL teachers will undoubtedly equate Palloff and Pratt’s (2000) “cyberspace classroom” to their own face-to face sessions where they have been promoting collaborative learning for years. The catch in e-learning lies elsewhere: how to overcome the lack of face-to-face contact between teachers and learners. Most teachers rely both on personal charisma to stimulate and hold their learners’ interest and on the experience of reading into participants’ body language for signs of receptiveness or boredom for either maintaining or adapting course content or even delivery.

From the learner’s point of view, Palloff and Pratt (2001:21) raise an interesting point: “with the removal of facial and body cues, introverts can easily establish a presence online ... frequently becoming quite verbal and interactive.” Self-consciousness diminishes as they feel they are away from the physical scrutiny of the teacher and their peers and can simply ‘be themselves’. This is borne out by Salmon’s (2000:8) research, based on students’ diary records of their thoughts, which shows that “some enjoy being ‘faceless’ and are happy to contribute to discussions”. However, she also mentions that others do not want to risk putting their ideas in a written form online. This is not a novel situation for the FL teacher who is used to doing a juggling act to draw out the quiet student and tone down the over-keen individuals so that both feel part of a class where exchanging ideas and opinions optimises the learning experience. As Sloman (2001:152) so aptly puts it,

The traditional skills of the [teacher] must never be overlooked. The ability to deliver materials to an audience, to manage interaction in the classroom and to build the learner’s self-confidence on a one-to-one basis remain skills of value. The arrival of e-learning simply means that they will be delivered in a new context.

However, Salmon (2000) believes that the online teacher, whom she calls an “e-moderator”, needs a wider range of expertise because, as online students have no face-to-face contact with each other or the e-moderator, they tend to feel isolated, especially if they have to

tackle technical problems at the beginning of the course. The role of the e-moderator evolves from welcoming and encouraging at the initial stages of a course to mediating and focusing as the course unfolds. The right balance has to be found between letting participants 'get on with the course' and never quite 'leaving them on their own' without support, direction or leadership.

Palloff and Pratt (2001) conclude that neither will teachers automatically know how to teach in the online environment nor will students know how to engage with each other or the material – both “need training and assistance in making the transition to the online environment.” Teachers who usually mother their students in face-to-face sessions need to learn to empower their online students and, conversely, students who commonly expect most of the input from the teacher will have to be weaned, otherwise the whole online experience may become very time-consuming and unproductive for both.

One of the INA group's concerns was how much teaching/learning time will be involved in e-learning. As a principle, every participant on a course represents 15 minutes of follow-up time per session; so, if there are twenty participants on the course, each session will require four hours of follow-up time. Participants, too, will have to be equally committed and set aside up to five hours a week (depending on the course objectives) for as long as the course runs. If participants log on frequently, they will find that they are not as time-bound as when attending face-to-face sessions because they still have the freedom to do so when and where it suits them. Working via this medium may, in some ways, require more self-discipline than the traditional face-to-face session but once teachers and students have adapted to this method of working, they can accommodate it within their routine.

### **Which skills can be developed online**

Having completed online courses, we believe that a blended learning system of synchronous, asynchronous and face-to-face sessions can cater for different learning styles and develop all four language skills. Asynchronous learning provides just the right framework for developing reading, listening and writing skills whilst synchronous learning is particularly suited to improving fluency. The absence of face and body cues heightens the need for learners to use, as Lee (2001:232) so perceptively points out, “a variety of communication strategies to interact with each other: modification devices, such as comprehension and confirmation check, request for clarification, and self-repair”.

The face-to-face sessions will complement the online sessions. They can be used for consolidating and clarifying, as well as concentrating on all four skills.

### **How to build an online course**

The more we worked on the courses, the more we discovered that they should be visually attractive, logical and consistent in design, with clear guidelines, easy to navigate and appealing to the user. Instructions should be worded very carefully and information presented in digestible chunks; for example, we divided our courses into lessons/units which were in turn divided into topics and sub-topics. In the ideal “online” environment, one page of information should take up just one screen only because, if participants have to scroll down through ‘screenfuls’ of monochromatic information, it is very likely they will lose interest.

A consistent font type (preferably one which is sans serif) and size, should be used throughout the course to ease reading. Consistent colour coding serves as a signpost (for example, blue for instructions, green for corrections) and helps participants get an immediate visual perception of each page of information/topic. However, the use of too many colours in text should be avoided as this will only serve to distract learners from the content. The use of small self-explanatory icons which represent ideas (for example, an exclamation mark can show a warning) can be placed next to text to draw the attention of learners or direct them.

The course home page should contain the layout of the course, be easily accessible, and act as a starting point if learners get lost navigating. Lessons/units should be clearly structured, starting off with the lesson’s objectives and ending with a lesson summary to show learners, firstly, what they are going to learn and, at the end of the lesson, to recap. Learning goals should be the key focus throughout the development of the course – they should be challenging yet manageable and, above all, clear. Without a clear purpose, learners will wonder how they will benefit from the course. Objectives should be measurable to allow learners to know how well they did in a particular task.

Compelling and realistic content will ensure that learners are interested and will keep coming back. Starting with easier tasks and building up to more difficult ones will boost learner motivation and self-confidence. We discovered that simple but attractive design will provide a comfortable working environment and will be more effect-

ive than having too many 'bells and whistles' which we had initially been tempted to use. Short welcoming messages at the beginning of each lesson/unit serves two purposes: to remind participants that they are not alone and to invite them to delve into the lesson/unit. Reinforcement at the end of a page/lesson creates expectations for the next lesson.

The course may contain vocabulary that learners need to know. However, constantly adding explanations directly into the content may make a page much too dense. In this case, a glossary containing all the new vocabulary should be made available. Pop-up windows can also be used for definitions or explanations.

A prime concern is how to make an online course as dynamic as a face-to-face course. The answer lies, according to Lee (2001:235), in group dynamics, in encouraging "everyone to participate and to learn from each other in a collective scaffolding environment". This can be achieved in developing activities where learners are invited to offer up ideas, have them criticised or expanded on, and get the chance to reshape them. Lightbown and Spada (1993) have found that, in the acquisition of a foreign language, co-operative rather than competitive goals keep students motivated because they "increase the self-confidence of students, including weaker ones – every participant in a co-operative task has an important role to play".

### **Characteristics of an effective online course**

An effective online course includes support for access to technology, pre-learning activities and post-learning reinforcement. Learning a foreign language is, in itself, a daunting experience for most FL students, without having to master the technology too. Some participants may need technical support in accessing the course as the experience of not being able to log on, when the other participants are breezing through the initial stages of a course, can kill even the most promising initiative.

If navigating a course poses an additional problem, students might spend more time grappling with the technology than with learning the language itself. All this unnecessary anxiety can be easily overcome if student induction consists of a step-by-step demonstration of how to use the tools available on the course so that they may quickly overcome the technology hurdle and become confident in the online learning environment.

Other participants may be highly IT literate but be very slow on getting used to communicating and learning online – these may need

to develop study skills before starting the course. A short tutorial with guidelines for communicating online should be a prerequisite for the course. This should include online etiquette, as well as methods for posting and replying.

Finally, as online courses are screen-based (unless participants choose to print out course content), participants may feel, when they come to the end of the course, that they have not learned much. It is therefore a good principle to provide a flashback of the course with the participants' own reflection of what they retained at each stage.

The role of both teacher and participants is clearly defined. Teachers should let participants know exactly when and how they can be reached and what kind of support will be given, for example, prompt replies to their queries and personal feedback on progress made. Teachers are not the sole providers of information. On the contrary, their role should be quite similar to that of a host at a party who provides a comforting and warm presence, valuing all participants, finding "unifying threads in a discussion, [building, weaving and representing] ideas constantly". (Salmon 2000: 125)

The role of participants should also be defined as this will make them feel accountable for their own progress and, most important of all, that of the group, right from the beginning of the course. Participants need to be made aware of the academic nature of the course and the amount of time and motivation they need to devote to it.

The course should be tightly scheduled, starting and finishing on a set date with learning and assessment deadlines, and should specify the amount of time that students are expected to allow for each lesson/unit. Participants should be made aware of the course goals all the way through.

### **Evaluation in e-learning**

Students like to have some sort of qualification as proof of their success. In fact, teachers find that assessment is the driving force that motivates students – without it, students feel they have not really been doing serious work. In online learning, constant feedback will make up for the visual absence of the teacher and reassure the learner. Ongoing evaluation of how well tasks and goals have been achieved, short tests, peer critique and the teacher's personalised feedback should constitute the basis of an online course.

At the beginning of the course, participants should be told the criteria for assessment: the weighting of the different activities and participation. Participation is doubly important online and should have a

direct relationship with assessment: assessed components of the course cannot be completed without participation in discussions and group work. During the course, learners should be reminded of where they are in regards to completed and non-completed material. At the end of a lesson, learners should be given an indication of their progress within the lesson.

## Conclusion

It is easy to be dazzled by the magic of technology and one may be tempted to think that e-learning is the Aladdin's lamp which will fulfil both learners' and tutors' dreams. Maybe it is, if we remember that technology itself is not the answer; it is a mere tool, which, if used correctly, can produce effective pedagogical results.

Our experience showed that e-learning can engage FL students just as well as the face-to-face session, as long as it has an activity – based approach where learning is embedded in relevant contexts. If group activity is linked to assessment, this means that students have to get used to communicating online with others, thereby establishing a community early on in the course. Participation in activities promotes problem solving, discussion and examination of topics from multiple perspectives. Although e-learning encourages student responsibility for learning, a crucial component is the support and guidance of the tutor in that it keeps students focused.

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