NINA MOLLEMA
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa
mollen@unisa.ac.za

Teaching Zulu online for L2 learners: Possibilities and Problems

INTRODUCTION

The University of South Africa (Unisa), as the largest university in South Africa and one of the largest distance education institutions in the world, aims to establish a global reputation as the leading provider of excellence in the field of education. Globalisation in this respect can only be achieved by employing the most recent technological educational innovations through Information and Communications Technology (ICT). With this aim in mind, Unisa urges its academics to employ online technology that would improve student-lecturer relationships, encourage student participation, expedite and automate administrative matters and transform archaic teaching attitudes and methods.

Although to many contact tuition still represents the ideal teaching environment, the paradigm shift effected by ICT compels distance education providers to consider new ICT-friendly ways of designing teaching and learning strategies. Hence, this paper sets out to assess the effectiveness of utilising ICT for teaching an African language certificate course to non-mother tongue or L2 learners in a distance learning education (DLE) context. The importance of interaction (especially orally and visually) for communicative distance language learning, its possibilities, impediments and feasible solutions is explored. Different types of interactive media, their implementation, effectiveness and costs are evaluated. The process of online course design, development and implementation of online tuition such as activities, student support and the ongoing measurement of effectiveness are examined. Implications for redesigning tuition in a distance learning environment using different online media are finally presented.

WHAT IS ONLINE INSTRUCTION?

Online instruction or e-learning refers to teaching and learning mediated by a computer which includes the Internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcasts, audio/videotape, interactive TV and CD-Rom. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is currently the preferred term to connote the interactive textual exchange in learning networks. These learning networks comprise of teachers and students communicating with each other in real time (synchronously) or off-line and sequentially (asynchronously). Teaching online may occur supplemental to an existing face-to-face course, or in hybrid mode or as a sole channel of education at a distance. For the purpose of this paper, online teaching signifies instruction delivered significantly online.

WHY TEACH ZULU COMMUNICATION SKILLS ONLINE?

Unisa's Zulu Communication Skills course is offered by means of contact tuition through the Centre for Pan African Languages and Cultural Development. Requests to teach this course outside the University's direct reach have gone unfulfilled for logistical and financial reasons. Restrictions experienced were mainly geographical - only students in the vicinity can attend the course. Furthermore the tutor system experimented with at other campuses was not very successful and it is was too costly to fly lecturers to other destinations on a weekly basis. Online learning can address this need. Teaching online also offers additional benefits that traditional classrooms cannot provide. For example, some learners are too timid to fully participate in class or are simply overpowered by the more dominant students. Computer anonymity allows these students to partake in this practical course without fear of embarrassment. Other online advantages are:

- Students have maximum control over their learning, which empowers them to explore and construct their own learning.
- Students are provided a means to learn individually at their own speed, and control the amount of practice and level of difficulty. In a classroom, the lecturer always paces the presentation for the average student; it may still be too fast for some and too slow for others.
- Communication with native speakers is made possible via video-conferencing and email.
- Interactive media allows simulation for expensive or inaccessible equipment; e.g. hypertext, which makes available to the student instantaneous, unlimited library resources at the click of a button.

Considering the advantages above, integrating multimedia into the current course would be a possible solution to the problems experienced.

WHAT ARE THE TUITION CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING ONLINE?

Designing an effective learning environment requires expertise in pedagogy, an analysis of the learning area and a choice of the correct instructional methodologies. These considerations correspond with Boyle (1997) who distinguishes two layers within the design process; a conceptual design layer informed by theoretical knowledge about learning and a presentation design layer which is about media choice and integration. These elements will now be briefly examined.

Pedagogy

In designing an online course, some of the pedagogic theories about learning and instruction should be drawn upon. The pedagogic poles extend from instructivist approaches to the more prevalent constructivist and collaborative, student-centred approaches. Within a South African environment, the trend is to use an outcomes-based learning paradigm. Since the Zulu Communication course is based on acquiring communication skills, a pedagogical approach called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is followed. Tutorials cover meaningful topics around which learners can develop communicative competencies that are directly applicable to their daily lives. These topics are presented in the form of a dialogue or reading comprehension to encourage students to engage in conversation with Zulu speakers. As such, task-based language learning with an integrated skills related approach is favoured.

The learning area

The learning area's tasks and activities are determined by the learning requirements within each learning domain. Being a practical class, the Zulu Communication Skills course intends to initiate the communication learning process by overcoming the core barriers to communication - a lack of knowledge and confidence. Every lesson considers the appropriate sequencing and structuring of learning tasks linked to the learning outcome(s) to be achieved. A lesson in the Zulu course constitutes the standard 3Ps structure: presentation, practice and production. During the presentation phase, the content of the lesson is explained and known work is revised. Thereafter new structures and vocabulary are practised through communication in the target language between participants and lecturer and/or the use of CDs. The lecturer furthermore explains the tasks which need to be produced before the next lesson, i.e. revision of the content of the lesson, practical real-world applications, report backs and self-study based on new lessons. The 3Ps structure can be adapted with ease for online teaching.

Knowledge of the particular multimedia used

Sufficient knowledge of the medium used is required in order to be able to choose appropriate technology options and to avoid design decisions which may prove to be complex, unattainable and expensive in the end. To enable proper performance, a technological system which conforms to education contexts and learner needs must be selected. Unisa is a virtual campus with a teaching platform called *myUnisa*, which is available free of charge to all registered students for online training, IT support, tutorials and chatting online. The *myUnisa* online course environment is ideal as a platform for this course for it also provides access to materials, such as electronic feedback letters and other resources and facilitates better communication with the University and the lecturers through e-mail and discussion facilities. Through preliminary investigations, it has been established that all students in the selected course have basic e-communication skills and have access to the Internet, whether at home or at work.

WHICH MULTIMEDIA IS SUITABLE FOR ONLINE TEACHING?

In redesigning the course to integrate information technology, one has to take into consideration the tools required for the medium. According to Laurillard (1994:22), "successful use of media depends on the learning context together with an understanding of how selected technologies work and under what conditions they appear to be effective". The following interactive educational media can be considered for teaching the Zulu Communication course online:

CD-ROM, which combines audio (synchronous or asynchronous) and visual (video, still images or text) elements. CD-ROMs are ideally suited to the delivery of content, particularly where students are invited to interact with the materials presented. CD-ROMs can also be used to store software that is currently impossible to provide via the Web, e.g. software that enables the learner to respond orally to a stimulus, record his/her own voice and play it back. This would suit the practical component of the course ideally. A further advantage of CD-ROM is that learners have easy access to it without having to connect to the Internet. Possible drawbacks are that CD-ROMs may be quite expensive to produce and that many require special software for installation.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), such as *WebCT*, *Blackboard*, *Moodle* and *myUnisa.* "A VLE is a Web-based package designed to help teachers create online courses, together with facilities for teacher-learner communication and peer-to-peer communication" (ICT4LT Module 1.1, 2006). VLEs can be used to deliver learning materials within an institution or wider environments. Advantages are the ease of delivery and management of learning materials. They can be restrictive in that not all aspects of communicative language learning are addressed, e.g. no VLE has listen / respond / playback activities.

Video-conferencing is ideal for synchronous oral and visual interaction in a DLE context. Wang (2004: 116) remarks that "(w)ith the employment of videoconferencing tools, distance language learning can be transformed from asynchronous and non-real time to orally and visually synchronous and real time. It is not an exaggeration to say that Internet-based real time technology is changing distance education quantitatively as well as qualitatively." Desktop videoconferencing (via the Internet) requires a microphone, loudspeakers, a web-camera plus appropriate software application and a broadband connection to the Internet. Shortcomings are limited person participation (only one-to-one or small groups of 4 to 10 people) and potential technical difficulties such as Internet bandwidth limitation and latency. Room-based videoconferencing (via an ISDN connection) involves groups sitting in different venues viewing each other on large screens. The quality of the video transmitted in this way is generally better than that offered by desktop videoconferencing systems, however, the set-up and running costs of videoconferencing of this type can be quite expensive. Unisa has already successfully implemented room-based videoconferencing for educational purposes; the trial course can make use of this type.

Audio-conferencing, whether via telephone or web telephony (via a PC) enables audio communication with more than one person anywhere in the world. Most of these services are free. Audio-conferencing could be utilised for oral practise or evaluation in this course.

E-mail consists of asynchronous texting. Communication between the teacher and student(s) and amongst students themselves can occur via electronic documents, but students can self-assess their work via automated computer feedback. This assessment procedure is important in the distance education context, as Pincas (2002:2) remarks: "they are seen by many as an alternative provision of formative feedback, thus holding down staff support requirements". It is also possible to attach audio and video clips to email messages, which is essential for the practice of pronunciation in the communication course.

As can be seen, the interactive media possibilities are infinite. It remains the task of the online course designer and teacher to select the best options serving the specific purpose of the course.

REDESIGNING A PROTOTYPICAL COURSE

Most scholars (Pincas 2002, Askew & Carnell 1998) agree that online teaching should replicate familiar, tested pedagogical practices. In this particular course, both cognition (explanation, understanding) and skills (practice) are tested. The learning outcomes are directed at the development of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and special emphasis is placed on communicative and cultural competence. The following paragraphs explicate possible material and lesson structure of an online course.

Material

With online registration, students receive the tutorial package consisting of a CD-ROM and a handbook (either online to be downloaded or in hardcopy) where instructions are issued to students to familiarize themselves with the multimedia and the course. The CD-ROM features the lecturer with PowerPoint Presentation teaching the lesson, as well as simulated real-world conversations (for correct pronunciation, sounds, etc.) and cultural footage (consisting of customs, values and history of the Zulu people).

Lesson structure

A lesson commences with input presented on the CD ROM by means of a lecture. At the start of the lecture, learners' interests are aroused by means of a cultural story or song, a relevant game, picture, audio recording or video sequence, an amusing anecdote - anything in connection with the lesson that will grab hold of their attention. New vocabulary, speech sounds or grammar is then presented. Students constantly have the option to rewind the CD ROM to listen again to the speech sound, or pause it to practice the speech sound, or even forward the CD if the information is already known.

During the Practice activities, new language items are identified, repeated and manipulated by the students. This can be done by referring the students to a website specifically created for practicing the language (VLEs), whether it is grammar based (i.e. by means of simple crosswords, flashcards, verb form tests, gap-fill exercises, multi-choice exercises, puzzles, etc.) or communicative (playing an audio/video clip/tape and repeating/answering the phrases/questions, online oral interaction, etc.). A typical communicative exercise is where students are given a video clip containing a dialogue between a person asking for directions and one giving directions, where after students will attempt to play the role of either person, repeating and practising the phrases.

In the Performance stage, the students attempt to use the new language in different contexts provided by the teacher. Regarding the "Asking Directions" lesson, a map could be provided on the CD-ROM where learners have to provide directions to a specific place. This information is recorded on the CD-ROM by students themselves for replaying and listening to correct pronunciation and tone. In a final exercise students could practise the dialogue/phrases with a mother-tongue speaker in a real world situation and report back to the lecturer and other learners about their experiences.

Throughout the whole lesson, the student is constantly supported by multimedia, e.g. help pop-ups. Lecturer feedback on every assignment as well as learner interactivity can be facilitated through the software package, but also by means of e-mail, chat or more traditional methods such as the phone or facsimile. At the end of the 12 weeks, oral assessment takes place via video-conferencing or audio-conferencing.

As demonstrated above, in designing this pilot course all elements of effective e-learning are to be taken into consideration. The choice of multimedia has to enhance the learning process built on an e-learning strategy that not only optimises the use of technology to create convenience for learners but also addresses key pedagogical issues. Being at a preliminary stage of implementation, further research is necessary to determine the holistic synthesis of the various online components of the course.

CONCLUSION

Unisa's drive towards globalisation effected a review of the use of ICT as educational tool. As such, the benefits of Internet-based course delivery over more conventional classroom-based instruction were examined in this paper. Pincas (2002:4) highlights the cost-effectiveness of 'borderless education':

> "Overheads are reduced by the lesser need for classrooms and other facilities, libraries are digitised to save physical space, and students become autonomous learners, both on and off campus. …In these ways, institutions can certainly provide 'university education' at dramatically lower cost than by traditional teaching methods".

This paper attempted to design a contextualised, technology-enhanced learning environment for distance Zulu L2 language learners. It was illustrated that the key to successful technological adaptation is a balance between applying useful concepts about learning and implementing innovations using the best attribute of each medium

used (Salmon 2002). However, further investigations into the efficacy of the course must be undertaken to provide new insights otherwise the enthusiasm about the implementation of e-learning could prove to be more futile than fruitful. As Salomon (2000:7) aptly advises “let technology show us what can be done and let educational considerations determine what will be done”.

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