## E.N.L.U. PROJECT TASK FORCE 3

# The use of distance education and e-learning for language learning among undergraduates

> This paper sets out the challenges to wider undergraduate modern language provision via open and distance teaching and e-learning based on experience from the Open University.

## ENLU – Task Force 3

The Brussels meeting agreed that positive action can only result from a clear documentation of existing relevant experience. To achieve this, a number of models of provision will be required to meet the diverse needs described by partners.

As a starting point, the group asked for an outline of the OU model of provision which is incorporated into this paper. This is intended to serve a dual purpose:

- It will provide a benchmark against which respondents can answer questions and compare and comment on the situation in their own institution. As most have little or no experience in the field, it was felt that cold questioning would not deliver quality responses
- It provides a model of provision to be explored and exploited and a research base into many issues that have been tested and reported from many thousands of students who have now studied modern languages with the OU over the past eight years.

This paper attempts to pick up themes, issues and challenges that need to be addressed via the proposed ENLU project questionnaire and research. Some key areas of potential activity for the ENLU Task Force are signalled.

As the note of the Brussels discussions sets out, the group is keen to ensure that any outcomes focus clearly on ways forward and not on generalised and generic commentaries that do not add to the detailed picture of potential provision.

## The development of the OU model for the provision of modern language course materials

The 'OU model' has been developed within a specific context, it incorporates bespoke materials developed from scratch to meet specific needs. This is the situation of most providers who seek to extend modern language provision by exploiting ODL and online within the HE context. Some 40,000 student courses have been studied since the courses were introduced in 1995.

Skills are developed through the study of texts, working through activities, skills practice and tutor support and feedback. A balance of language skills is presented month by month throughout a course. A typical pattern could involve a new topic being introduced via video with teaching points introduced via authentic or authenticated material, which may be text or audio based. A range of exploitation approaches is used. The learner is aware at each point of what is being practised and the intended learning outcomes.

***The challenge within the ENLU project is to exploit this and other experiences among the partners to ensure that provision is extended across all partners regardless of type or size of institution.***

## Lessons learned from experience

The work of OU students highlights a number of important issues for all language teachers, not jut those working with adult part time learners studying through open and distance teaching methods. A number of aspects of learning take on a new prominence in the context of ODL and online delivery.

The first is to recognise the transfer of responsibility for learning to the learner and the management of this process. Learner training is required and time needed to acquire the

skills. In parallel, the role of the teacher, shifts and varies across the life of a course of study and the experience of the learners. It encompasses academic counsellor, facilitator of learning, manager, adviser as well as actual teacher. Staff  have to be sensitive to these issues and watch as the learners take charge and judge how best to manage the teacher : learner inputs to the process.

The quality assurance processes with many different readers and critics are essential if the resulting materials are to be worked through successfully by a varied audience of students.

Aspects related to study time and organisation, pre-eminent in OU study, and pertinent to all learning. They affect the ways in which we design and structure the curriculum.

New technologies present solutions to many traditional challenges in modern language teaching and learning, such as the tension between the public nature of a performance-based subject and the need for personal and at times private practice and rehearsal. The diverse range of skills and associated activities can be mixed and blended effectively via technological applications. They offer efficient and economic solutions to many issues in language learning and address a number of key issues encountered by learners. As technology and online links become more widely available in the home setting this will no doubt be a major influence on future provision, with learners having immediate access to learning support and resources on demand.

## Structuring the programme

Within a blended learning proposal, the first decisions relate to how best to balance new media with the more traditional elements such as print in order to maximise learning opportunities. Budgets as well as pedagogical judgements determine some of that balance. Video is very expensive whilst audio is relatively easy to produce and economic. Print is essential to all of the materials for the home learner. The format and style of the printed material influence the learning in fundamental ways and investment in design and layout pay dividends but again pose the challenge of balancing considerations of economy and pedagogy.

The organisational structure and design of the courses are intended to allow access to learning to be as open and flexible as possible. The style of the text and the language of the teaching aim to communicate effectively with as wide and diverse an audience as possible. They must offer accessibility  to the inexperienced learner and a sound structural basis to the learning.

***This is a key success factor for the ENLU project where partners present a rich diversity of motivations for learning, with a diversity of former experience of language learning and a rich mix of cultural contexts.***

**I**t was decided that video would be limited in order to allow for a greater variety of audio material and a higher investment in print. The video material is an attractive starting point and from this the planning of the overall structure and the construction of other elements follows. This approach ensures that the visuals are fully integrated into the learning pattern across the entire structure of the course.

New learning is introduced in many varied formats. This takes account of the learning styles and backgrounds of the audience. There is a careful balance between the use of authentic recordings and studio recorded language. The overall aim is to provide a structure that does not intimidate, but through which the student can progress towards an acceptable level of mastery within each topic area. Levels are defined within a range of styles and modes of language appropriate to an adult speaker of the language.

Once the balance of media is decided and the relationships between them defined in learning terms, the process of writing specifications for each medium starts. Key influences being for instance the value of each medium to a lone learner, the time, setting and purpose of activities and the media such as audio recordings that they incorporate etc.

***Many of these questions are pertinent to all language learners and to the organisation of any study outside the conventional classroom. They should be addressed in the context of the ENLU project.***

## The Learner perspective

Learners come to this method and mode of study for a wide variety of reasons, but <u>not</u> because their learning intentions are different from those choosing more traditional teaching. Evidence shows that motivations and expectations of those studying through supported open learning are just the same as those of any other language learner. The desire to speak and communicate being uppermost. It falls then to the academics to devise learning methods that will enable these outcomes to be met through the new methodologies, <u>not to modify the outcomes.</u>

The structures, design, content and pedagogical underpinning are most effective when the learner has an understanding of the rationale and process and can exploit it most effectively in order to meet personal needs. The transfer of this responsibility to the learner is a key aspect of open and distance learning and any form of autonomous learning. The acquisition of these skills and understandings is integral to the learning process and with the teaching of the language.

Learners need to develop two different sets of skills therefore:
– those associated with the language and
– study skills specifically allied to language study such as using the dictionary, learning to skim read, listening for the general meaning and detail etc.

Students develop these by self-study and they are integrated within the overall learning process. Learners must not only complete activities and tasks in the material but also be aware of the reasons for working on them. Only with a clear understanding of the learning process can learners judge and reflect and monitor true progress in their learning.

Learner aims derive from a two-fold basis. On the one hand those of personal priorities, such as a desire to improve spoken skills and on the other the needs of the course, to successfully complete the assessment and gain the qualification. Students may decide to concentrate on the former at the expense of the latter. Some of these may be addressed by more flexible approaches to assessment.

Before starting to study, the learner needs to know what equipment is needed, the approximate time allocation for the planned learning session and some ideas as to the tasks within the learning. Learners need to organise and plan their study to fit with personal lifestyles and circumstances.

Experience shows that students value the print and audio elements above the others, for reasons of ease of use and sheer practicality. Video is a mainly static medium and therefore limited in its use and often inaccessible in domestic situations. Such considerations have led to a format that allows each medium to be used more independently and controlled by the learner. Such practical circumstances and situations, informed by on-going learner feedback, inform and guide new developments.

Audio is a key element for personal language practice and the development of productive spoken skills. It provides a diverse range of practice material and allows the individual to test and exploit imaginative and creative learning opportunities. It can complement authentic material by providing additional practice; it can also provide semi-scripted studio recordings providing 'rehearsal conditions' for different language learning purposes.

## Raising awareness of the learning process and individual progression

Learning exercises and tasks are designed to suit a range of learning outcomes. They can be graded and varied to provide motivating and varied programmes. Students use them to improve fluency or accuracy. The focus is signalled to the learner so that for instance by timing their inputs to the spoken tasks, they can evidence for themselves improvements in fluency and track the benefits of study practice.

Such positive perceptions are key to maintaining and building the motivation to learn of individual learners. The approach is dependent on developing positive self-awareness and the ability not only to self-assess and appraise but also to identify any weaknesses within an overall personal skills profile. Ideally the individual should be able to match outcomes to personal needs identified at the start of the programme. The ability to monitor and access evidence of progress is one of the most important elements in the teaching cycle.

## Integrating the teaching and learning process

The balance between ensuring the full range of skills development whilst introducing sufficiently new and challenging content is a major issue in developing the materials. Categories of learning input comprise:

- assumed learning from previous knowledge
- elements to be learned for assessment and key to the core of the course
- elements for recognition and passive knowledge which were not to be specifically tested. Each is defined for each skill area.

Any key learning must be not only adequately covered but also presented in ways that provide opportunities for the learners to self-test, revise and consolidate as they move through a course.

Evidence shows that adult learners were likely to seek perfection in each task at each stage. In fact the structure <u>differentiated</u> between priorities and the students have to learn to deal with elements of the language in varying importance depending upon the learning outcome and priority in the course of study.

This is normally handled and managed by the classroom teacher but in supported self study the learner has to engage in this process and manage it efficiently. These issues together with the balance between presenting sufficient challenge and range of content whilst ensuring appropriate pace and progression are without doubt the most complex areas in the development of supported self-study materials.

Any problems of clarity in study instructions or guidance will ultimately undermine the learning process. Perceptions as to 'clarity' vary and at each stage the materials are tested on groups of potential learners and adapted as a result.

## Monitoring progress

Students who study on a part time basis have to apportion their time carefully, organising their study around the demands of the assessment. Learners work to personal plans focused on success and not necessarily at covering the content in all its complexity.

The process depends upon the self-motivation of the learner to continually improve, and, to achieve this, the subject matter itself must be of inherent interest. A balance and variety in content, approach, media use and assessment modes all contribute to the provision of a rich and varied resource likely to have wide appeal.

The approach will inevitably include redundant material, with learners selecting only appropriate and appealing learning routes to suit personal aims, but testing demonstrates that there can be an imbalance between the allocation of study time and the learning priorities, with learning often taking far longer than anticipated.

Learning, and especially home study, is based on self-discipline and a sound study routine. The material has to allow the time for the 'self-teaching' to be worked through and, more importantly, internalised and acted upon to proceed effectively and to become an efficient learner. Experience shows not only that distance learners need to actively develop these skills but that they need to apply considerable time to them within their studies as they are largely working independently.

Productive speaking is normally practised via various activities and the student is encouraged to record efforts and to listen and compare either with the original or with earlier work. A personal log can be important at this stage. It is helpful for learners to record not only progress but their feelings about their work if possible, including perceptions on their

performance and where they feel they can improve. Immediate feedback and recording is encouraged as immediate impressions give the most informative perspective on learning. The log allows the learner to compare performance <u>from evidence rather than memory</u>. Normally progress made is considerable and this acts as a highly motivating factor. By keeping records in this way can progress be acknowledged and performances compared.

## Assessing the Learning

Assessment varies across the courses but comprises two elements: course-work and examination-based elements. All four skills are covered and learners receive a profile of their performance as well as a final result. The profile indicates how they perform in each of the skill areas.

The courses include an oral examination. This is carried out in groups of between three and five candidates and includes tasks ranging from a short formal presentation to group discussions. The aim being to ensure that students are tested in a situation where they communicate with others and use their language in an unfamiliar setting, both prepared and spontaneous in nature.

## Engaging the learner / improving self-awareness

Learner logs begin to establish individual learning patterns, they allow learners to identify weaknesses and strengths and to develop techniques to overcome difficulties and allow sufficient time for practice in these areas of language acquisition.

Productive writing is dealt with in similar ways with guide writing being used in practice work and model writing, not answers being provided. The feedback, which comprises corrected or completed activities with considerable feedback is written in a style to emulate the teacher speaking directly to the learner.

Reading and listening texts are dealt with in more traditional ways and lend themselves well to self-study. Learners working through the OU programmes become proficient at these skills and well used to judging their performance beyond just the score that they gain for their work.

The completed assignment, including any audio recordings is sent to the tutor who marks the work and gives written and recorded feedback. Feedback needs to be rapid. The tutor may well offer additional feedback via telephone.

Personal records form an important part of work and study plans but the more formal assessments are also very important. They are the measure by which the learner knows whether their personal performance is in line with expectations from the course team academics and whether they are measuring up to the expected external standards.

Positive perceptions of progress and realistic expectations are important in positive learning. Progress must be evident and if possible measurable by the learner. Difficulties and problems should be a positive part of the learning process.

Feedback from learning must be clear and easily understood and learner perceptions need to be managed sensitively. Guidance on the quality of work, study and learning techniques are all important.

## Learner preparation

A range of approaches to preparing learners is used. Increasingly, self-marked assessments (SMAs) have been introduced to replace the. They allow the learner to carry out a personal assessment of learning. They are organised with automatic feedback on expected performance levels and this has proved very helpful to learners. For more able learners it provides a quick and easy gauge as to progress and less confident learners find that it provides the occasion for self-testing within a confidential environment.

Courses include elements such as booklets and tapes dedicated to practice in specific skill areas such as reading or vocabulary building or listening. They enable the learner who has identified a weakness to improve and focus on that aspect in isolation.

## Personalised learning programmes

Material is written to address a range of individual needs and learning patterns. New teaching is introduced in several ways and in different modes in order to cover individual preferences. The learner will become efficient at predicting the time needed to cover new work and to complete tasks and assessment - these skills are developed not inherited. <u>All learners say that they had no special experience or background in such learning techniques prior to studying with the OU.</u>

***ENLU should address the issue of learner preparation in the context of widening provision via ODL and online teaching and learning.***

Courses have excellent retention records and part of the reason for this may be that students have a deeper understanding of the study process and have a better insight into their personal learning.

## Teaching the courses

<u>The issues of pace and progression through the curriculum are the aspects which perhaps above all others have been most adapted in response to feedback</u>. The general recognition of the time it takes a learner to embed new learning, to practise new skills and become an efficient learner are recognised and the 'learning curve' across the length the course adjusted accordingly.

Students in languages receive around twenty hours of face to face contact with their tutor over the eight months of the course. They are distributed in a range of ways but often through a series of one-day schools. The tutor is responsible for the face to face tuition but also for all guidance and help required by the students. This is usually delivered by telephone or online. The tutor offers a mix of academic and personal guidance. Tutors are trained to work in the new learning environments and to have a thorough knowledge of the material and the expectations of the learners.

Staff development is seen as essential. A staff development pack is provided to each new member of the teaching staff. They are encouraged to discuss their teaching in groups if possible.

***ENLU should consider the issue of staff development.***

New tutors' work is monitored regularly through the first year. The monitor provides feedback to the tutor so that the tutor goes through a process not dissimilar from that of the learners.

## Support and guidance

A guiding principle of the OU is that its courses and programmes are open to all, there are no pre-course entry conditions. Individuals assess their ability and level via diagnostic tests and personal guidance. Pre-course advice and guidance is available via telephone, online and advice services. Most courses provide a range of diagnostic and preparatory materials.

The entry and exit levels of the courses are developed in relation to frameworks such as the Council of Europe. The challenge then is to bring a student cohort with different starting points and learning backgrounds to similar exit points as defined by external benchmarks.

## ENLU Task Force 3

The aim of extending the outreach of undergraduate language teaching will encompass many of these issues. They will play out differently for partners, but the fundamental challenges remain constant. Much of the experience and feedback from the Open University could inform those developments as they move ahead. The work provides an informed basis for all such related developments, whatever the format.

***Anne Stevens, Director, Learning Partnerships, Open Broadcast Unit, Open University, UK   September 2004***