Assessing e-learning beyond Virtual Classroom

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Abstract

The online initiative in Education for the six months, from April 2020 till September 2020 has characterized our shared and personalized teaching experiences. With the aim of redefining and developing our learning skills, we as teachers have adapted to new learning experiences. The questions arising from the experiences are; how can we manage or self-direct these efforts? And what did we learn about teaching from the online initiative? The experiences which were most significant for learning on the program were the new teaching context, learner feedbacks, peer feedbacks, and reflections on the sessions. All of these experiences were reflected in our practice on re-examining our concerns and decisions. Today our pedagogical skills are developing from fragmented program components and from designing e- materials. The data for the study is obtained from the class teacher, from my Post Graduate English Language Teaching class and from an observer known to my learners. Data is also collected from individual teacher reflections on a range teaching topics. The audio-taped lessons enabled the teacher and the learners to review data afterwards. Analytic approach is adopted for the study and the findings are data-driven. Online teaching is fast changing with its implicational factors re-enforcing face-to-face interactions.

Introduction

The online initiative has brought new strategies in differing aspects for the process of our professional teaching. With a variety of apps for teachers, video conferencing tools and online learning softwares, the challenge is on replacing face-to-face interactions into learner-centered virtual classrooms. The features of the teaching-learning process, such as instant feedbacks, sudden laughter, facial gestures and vocal clues were common learning environments in a

traditional classroom. The test for the digital infrastructure is to include them in the virtual classrooms. The other concerns are distance learning with technology; feeble internet connectivity, the multimedia and social media. Our professional development today has shifted from Open and Distance Learning to Distance Learning with technology. Are we considering these implications for our future professional learning? The explanatory and descriptive information for the students in online session interactions is usually teacher-centered with few learner interactions. This needs to be more learner-centered, based on a practical approach to teaching with more interactions among learners. If all the learners of the session are not interacting on the teaching app, they can be involved into self assessment, alternative testing and autonomous learning with multimedia after the sessions, with regular interactions on the social media.

Assessing the learner output in language education has incorporated a number of conceptual innovations. Dealing with learner responses, in online learning is different. My class observer in one of my online class noted that learners were engaged in collecting answers for assignment and term end questions in the online sessions. These were politely re-scheduled for the social media interactions. Being at a distance, the teacher could not register visual feedback from facial expressions and had to request for individual learner responses. Few learner's could interact. Other learners had to be satisfied with one or two group queries. The responses on the tasks were not praised as in face-to-face interactions. There was no extra time for the encouraging words following their responses. The responses were accepted without much comment. Other queries were communicated through Social Media. Interactions on the social media between the teacher and the learners are of the following types.

i) *Learner interactions*: Learners request for clarifications on a topic, posting worked out answers on structural and phonological analysis, learning on morphological and structural analysis, and seeking knowledge on specific topics. Learner had sent the photos of his queries on his worked out tasks through the social app. This had saved his time for explaining his query over phone and got his page checked at the same time. Another learner wanted audios on a particular topic from her study material. The learner had recorded voice messages of her teacher on that topic for 13 minutes and 22 seconds on her smart phone. This had been a resource for her learning. The recording was reused when some other learner had the same difficulty with his learning.

ii) *Teacher interactions*: These are posting e-versions of SLM pages, checking structural and phonological analysis, introducing new structural processes, posting answers, clearing doubts. A single eight word VP structure requires five online interactions on social media sites for the learning. This can be time consuming. Interaction with a learner which started at 10.59 am ended at 11.31pm, with breaks in between on an odd July day. It was by that time the learner had felt satisfied with his learning. The total correspondences on that day were 105. The interactions are so frequent now, that it can be stated, the structural analysis (IC analysis) requires a minimum of 30-60 social media correspondences for analysing 6 sentences by a learner whereas basics of syntactic analysis requires 90 correspondences for analysing 10 sentences. Phonological and morphological analysis requires 5-30 correspondences for analysing 20 words.

The infrastructural and contextual variables in Second Language Education contributed in the pedagogical innovations and principles of online sessions. The innovation-decision process

constitutes the first step in forming an attitude – whether to adopt or reject implementation. For example, considerably lengthy learner interactions of the face to face interactions are replaced with short analytic and cognitive reflections. According to Fullan 2001, there are three phases of implementation. These three phases were initiation, actual implementation and institutionalization. Initiation or the first phase, recognizes the beginning of the changes, which in our context, was to adopt the online mode. This was based on our autonomous learning from the context. The second is actual implementation, where we had begun to apply our knowledge on teaching online in the sessions. The third is institutionalization, or using the innovation in everyday classroom. This is yet to be incorporated, as their utility and validity are to be checked before institutionalization.

In this context, we as teachers have the freedom to incorporate innovations in the different stages of teaching. Teachers can develop powerful language learning environments suitable for their contexts for all the students. With these environments in mind, we as teachers decide on our actions in the online sessions. These actions have to be carefully planned, and make them flawless in our approach. We are inspired by our knowledge, and experience gathered from teaching in online sessions.

The online initiative has spared us with the time to see the connections between fragmented program components. For example, the connections between topics, tasks and activities of the program. This was an opportunity to share the perspectives and consider the implications of our own teaching. From the learner feedback in the chat boxes, online conversations, after session emails, and social media interactions learners have reviewed their own learning and has shown ample instances of improving their learning.

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The 'distance' of Distance Education has ceased to exist in the present context. The implications of

online teaching are presented in the following diagram.
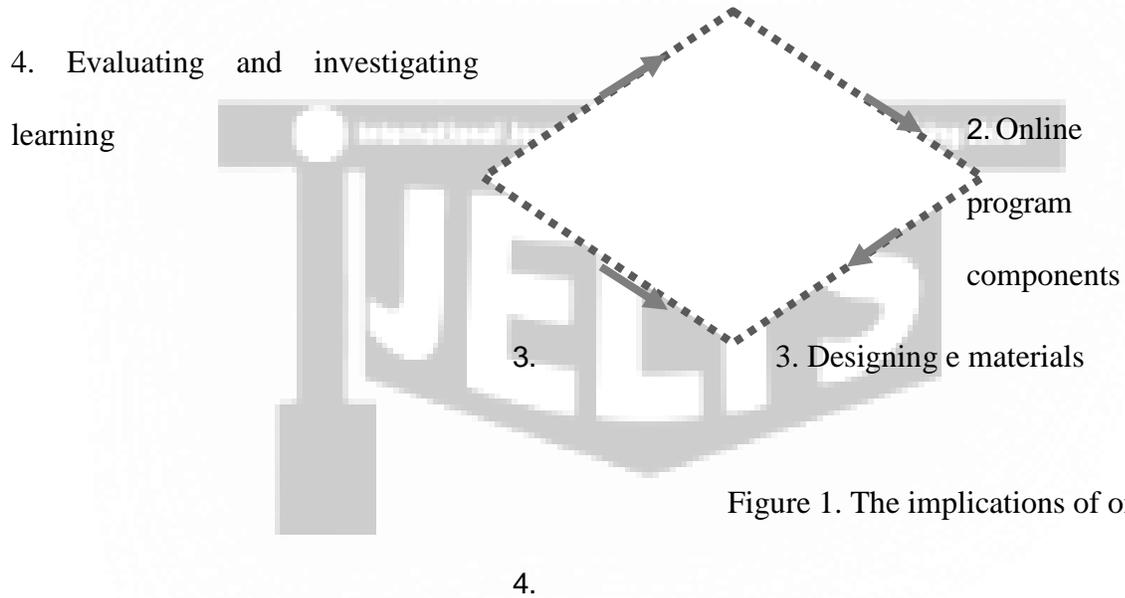
1. Exploring the learning context

4. Evaluating   and   investigating

learning

2. Online

program

components

4. Evaluating   and   investigating   learning

3.   3. Designing e materials

Figure 1. The implications of online teaching

4.

Exploring the learning context; the learning context adopts innovations of diverse kinds for language teachers. The innovations are advantageous for teachers as they can be prepared within few minutes and uploaded or displayed on the learners screen in fractions of seconds, eliminating the need for preparing multiple learner copies as hand outs. They are part of the smooth transactions, involving personal gains for the teacher. For the learner, they are advantageous in terms of educational effectiveness. Learners can access them any time for revision, for assignment workouts and even for re-learning. The innovations were originally designed as the course materials; with the purpose of learner access during and after online sessions were in the form of texts for online classes, learning documents, worksheets and audio-visuals suitable for the new learning context. The learners were in access of huge e-data in addition to the Self Learning Materials, which also had e-versions. The new phase of creating additional e-materials is still in its trial stage, where the adoption is partly dependent on learners. The experimentation on e-materials and their implications in the learning context will be on along with assessing our online teaching.

In one of the online sessions, the learners had appeared for a class test. A thirty page text material for the test was posted eight hours before the class. During the class the first part of the text was explained, discussing all the test answers. The second part of the material was not discussed. The learners were tested on information gap, opinion gap (subjective & objective) and reasoning gap tasks and few other activities. The learners did not perform well on the first part of the material. However during the test they could manage few minutes for going back to the posted material and quickly scan the materials searching for the answers from the second part. This time they could get all correct answers. Thus selective listening to stretches of discourse for deriving

information was arduous for them whereas reading the e-discourse for short responses was not. The

session was designed to develop global understanding and make inference, to which all the learners

had responded. Extensive listening was better than selective listening in virtual class tests. The

performances of the learners and the e-task and activities of the session is presented in the following

worksheet 1.

	e-Task type and activity in flexible format	Learner 1	Learner 2	Learner 3
1	Information gap	X	√	X
2	Opinion gap – subjective	√	X	√
3	Opinion gap – objective	√	X	X
4	Reasoning gap	√	X	X
5	Comparing – finding similarity and differences	√	X	√
6	Complete the sentence	√	X	√
7	Answer a question	√	√	X
8	Making inferences	√	√	√

Worksheet 1: Exploring the learning context

Online program components: a) Learner and the learning process. The online learner is different

from the traditional learner in their approaches and strategies of learning. The learning process of the

social learner's includes online tutorials and walk through on social media sites anytime and

anywhere to crave their curiosity. These learners are of two categories. The first category prefers

learning on multimedia-based lessons. The second category learns in interactive sessions and on

social media. The live interactive sessions are not the only option for learning for the learners

who could not access the live sessions. Many prefer online learning options which are easily available and which create classroom based learning. They have easy access to learn from recorded live sessions and uploaded class materials within the program. The

happen-to-be virtual learners follow the same syllabus, submit the same assignments and study with the same teachers as in the non-virtual classes. They communicate with their teachers and batch-mates from a distance with technological wonders, created with laptops, smart phones and iPads.

b) Teacher education and teaching e-materials: Synchronous instruction using the right tool in right environment replicates best opportunities to learn and practice. Online learning communicates lessons faster, demands real time concentrated learning than traditional classes. The 70 mins Post Graduate online sessions usually accommodate audio-video two way learning, giving a more personal classroom-like experience. This synchronous learning is insufficient. Thus many learners seek asynchronous instruction on social media sites after the live online sessions. Adoption of tools for online teaching methods for learner engagement is a key element for teacher education. Recreating a learner friendly course environment and flexible schedule for learning are essential in the approaches and methods of online teaching. The tools for lively interactions used for the two kinds of online learners discussed above are: streaming video platforms, Live-With-the-Learner chats, Web conferencing tools, telephone availability, and virtual office hours. These tools are for asynchronous learners who work on their own schedule.

Designing e-materials: The new teaching learning interface directs the need for developing systematic and effective online class materials. The idea is to encourage autonomous learners

into the program, who are isolated in their contexts. Many of our learners did not have the hard copy

of the Self Learning Materials of the course. The online session, the soft copy of the study materials

and e-materials are the only opportunities for professional learning. Thus there was a need for

designing e-materials for the online contact programs. The idea came from organizing the session

activity into four phases. All of this is discussed in the worksheet on 'my teaching idea'.

Teaching idea/ activity	
How I designed the idea	Organized the session activity into a) Short lectures, b) Learning re-enforced tasks, c) Learner Interactions, d) Evaluating learning.
Age/ level of learners	School and College Teachers (Adult learners).
Teaching tools	Power points with voice-over, documents composed on the topics, lesson plans, flow charts, and diagrams.
Organizing learners	Learner roles in the sessions; 1. Active listener, 2. Interactive partners, 3. Activity participator, 4. Self evaluator.
e- Materials	Tasks designed for interactive Web pages:

	a. Games on language tasks.
	b. Problem solving activities.
	c. Enquiry-based assignments.
	Photo shorts of relevant documents (text, tasks etc).
e-tools	eXe authoring environment, iDevices, Hot Potatoes authoring tools, Free Mind – Mind mapping.

Worksheet 2: My teaching idea

The interactive Web pages, specially designed for the online initiative contained texts, questions and answers and Web-based exercise. The exercises were of six types. Question- based, gap-fill, matching, crosswords and building linked units on the material. These activities were used in online sessions. Let us take an example. In one of the sessions the learners were presented with a reading text of eight sentences and a topic for textual analysis. They were asked to note the ways the text is tied together with references within and outside the text. This was accompanied by a quiz of ten marks with answers for self-evaluation. The learners did not respond individually. In a group activity all of them scored 10/10 together. Working with e- tasks, the learners scored higher in cumulative participation. For individual participation the score was lower. The e-tasks were time savers and provided the learners an opportunity to make a personal sense to the program. They also re-enforced learning. Some of the learners were unfamiliar with the task procedures and this was reflected in their performance on the tasks. They had to be updated on the task components. Slowly they came up with spontaneous responses. The performance of online learners in the past was better in formative and summative evaluation than those of the traditional learners. The learners of present academic year however do not have any other option than adapting to the online instruction. The learners were updated on the materials after the

sessions for further study references.

The e-materials make the online lectures more attractive and address a substantial portion of the asynchronous learners needs, which otherwise demand extra time and more learner- teacher interaction on social media. For solving the analytical and cognitive tasks on topics, discussions and teacher guidance is sometimes required initially. Later on working with the Learning Management System, learners who had mastered the topic from synchronous and asynchronous learning help out other learners of their batch.

Evaluating and investigating learning: Making decisions on what would improve our work; we tried on keeping classroom diaries and then collected data on them. The two questions which covered most of the sessions were what we learned and what recommendations can we give for the sessions on the same topics. Even though the sessions are mostly conducted through the lecture mode within a reduced time (the 1 hr session instead of the 3 hrs session in face-to-face interactions) continuous speaking makes the time loaded with facts and boring. Moreover, the learners who had no scope for interaction feel left out. The short sessions had the topics of three hrs sessions to be completed along with learner-centered approach. The tools for off- hour support were frequently used along with e-mail communications. Turning the online session into Forums and discussion boards was also thought of for engaging learners into authentic problem based activity for developing skills for becoming successful practitioners. In one such forum, the learners of the Diploma in English Language Teaching had sent their observations on the e-materials of a topic taught in their online session. They had assessed the e-materials from learning, examination and application aspects. Replying to a set of twenty questions in the chat

box of the Web conferencing tool, with the options 'yes', 'no' and 'partly', they had stated the

following.

	Learner assessment of **e-material**	Learner 1	Learner 2	Learner 3
1.	Is the e-material attractive?	yes	yes	yes
2.	Does it reflect your needs and interests?	partly	yes	yes
3.	Is it about the right length?	no	partly	yes
4.	Is it durable?	yes	yes	yes
5.	Are there enough authentic e-materials, relevant to the learning needs?	yes	yes	yes
6.	Do the e-materials achieve an acceptable balance between knowledge about language and practice in using the language?	partly	yes	yes
7.	Is there acceptable balance between integrated language skills?	yes	yes	yes
8.	Does it contain communicative activities on independent language use?	yes	yes	yes
9.	Do the e-materials provide answers and help on additional activities?	yes	yes	no
10	Can you use the e-materials without teacher's guide?	yes	yes	yes
11.	Are the approaches in the materials suitable for you?	yes	partly	yes

12.	Do you practice with additional materials such as audios, audio-videos?	yes	partly	yes
13.	Do the sessions have spiral approach, so that there is regular revision of different contexts?	yes	yes	yes
14.	Are the materials well-structured and systematic?	yes	yes	yes
15.	Have you improved on your lesson, while working with e-materials?	yes	yes	yes
16.	Will the materials be of aid in the exam preparation?	yes	partly	partly
17.	Is there a balance between learner needs and exam requirement?	yes	partly	yes
18.	Is there enough exam practice?	yes	partly	partly
19.	Does the material contain useful hints on exam technique?	yes	partly	partly
20.	Does the material require time for preparation?	yes	yes	partly

Worksheet 3: Learner evaluation of e-materials

The reply was 'partly' for nine questions and 'no' for two. The learners felt that that e-materials were not of the right length and did not provide answers and help on additional activities. It was also clear that all learners were not learning using all the online learning tools. Then would have found additional activities from e-study materials and the answers to all e-activities were on recorded chats. Continuing with the shift in the teaching-learning approaches, from traditional to online, there will be a follow up on change with online evaluation. The reply was 'partly' to most of the exam and e-materials questions. The learners were unsure of this during their learning.

Conclusion

Today our goal is to create optimal e-environments for autonomous learning. The learning context is technology based TBLT with an emic (participant-relevant) perspective.

Communication in interactive texts provides opportunities for working on tasks with self correction, a facility not present in face-to-face learning. Text chat in social media is a necessary tool for online teaching, as learners use text messages to correct and learn from each other.

Voice chat messages, recorded and reused on clarification requests, had lowered communication stress and time. Learners in groups are more successful than individual attempts in approaching critical thinking skills for problem solving within a technological environment.

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