

Culture and eLearning Design – Reflections on Integrating F2F and Online

Eric Brewster, Nicola Cavaleri, Anny King and Christoph Zähler

University of Cambridge

eb335@cam.ac.uk, nch23@cam.ac.uk, ank11@cam.ac.uk, cz201@cam.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The CUTE (Chinese University Teachers Training in English) pilot project (2003-2004) within the framework of the *eChina-UK* programme aimed at improving the linguistic, presentation, and writing skills for academic exchange and teaching of Chinese academics across several fields at Tsinghua University, Beijing. One of the key features of this programme from the start was the specification of a 70% online to 30% F2F delivery of the course. During the development, trialling and implementation of the programme, significant insights into the culture of the Chinese classroom and the parameters for effective online design were gained. These insights ranged from insights into the nature of Chinese learning strategies, attitudes towards roles of teachers and learners, to attitudes towards the use of online materials.

This paper will focus on the results of the action research carried out during the design and implementation of the online support materials (December 2003-September 2004) and the F2F teaching experience (July and September 2004). A combination of observations, testing, questionnaires, individual and focus group interviews, tracking data, and comments in diaries and on the online forum inform the reflections presented in this paper. The needs analysis, 12 week course (three weeks F2F contact and 9 weeks of supported online self-study), and the continuous, collaborative development of the online course materials were the first contact points with Chinese classrooms for the tutors and provided numerous challenges for tutors, trainees, designers, and content developers to established practices and significant opportunities for self-development, critical reflection, and insights into learning and teaching in a F2F/online integrated course.

Keywords

F2F/online integration, learner support, cultural insights, online material design

INTRODUCTION

The CUTE Project, part of HEFCE's *eChina-UK* programme, started in September 2003 and ended in September 2004. The Language Centre of the University of Cambridge, as part of the Open Cambridge Consortium, cooperated with Tsinghua University in Beijing in a one year pilot project which aimed to improve the academic English skills of a pilot group of 25 HE Chinese teachers. Its aim was to assist Chinese university teachers, mainly in science and technology subjects, to improve their English skills for academic exchange and bilingual teaching through the integration of online learning support and face-to-face interaction. The course was to be delivered in two face-to-face sessions (3 weeks) with online material support (9 weeks) for a total course of 12 weeks. This constituted a ratio of 30% classroom interaction and 70% online learner support in the form of materials and a forum.

The project focused on four main themes:

- Collaboration to develop a common language and course design
- Integration of the online and face-to-face course components
- Development of the trainees' English presentation and writing skills as well as teaching skills
- Exchange of Cultural insights

In relation to the CUTE project, the aim of placing the learner at the heart of the learning process complemented the needs of the trainees at Tsinghua University as HE teachers learning the skills for bilingual teaching as well as the University of Cambridge's Language Centre's successful tried-and-tested methodology.

The pilot focused on a skills-based, process-oriented, practical 'how to' approach to learning and teaching in

English. The methodology was transparent and the purpose of each element of the pilot explicit, which encouraged the trainees to make informed choices on their learning paths. A wide range of learning tools diversified the trainees' choices, while also offering support, both online and face-to-face.

The main principles of this type of learner support are:

- A focus on learner needs
- The collaborative development of materials and learning environments that best suited learner needs
- Learning environments that are rich, varied and flexible (pop-up definitions)
- The integration of online and face-to-face learning
- Sensitivity to linguistic diversity and cultural perspectives

These principles directly informed the planning, development and delivery of the CUTE course. In a like manner, the culture and learning styles of the Chinese trainees demanded closer investigation and reflection.

CULTURAL ISSUES

In contrast to much of the literature published on the Chinese learner and learning styles, the issue of cultural influence on learning styles and attitudes needs to be seen from the individual and "corporate" perspectives, rather than from the collective or stereotypical, as is the case in much of the past literature on the Chinese learner styles (as cited in Kennedy, 2002; Gieve & Clark, 2005). Within this paper, emphasis will be placed upon the observation and comments of individual learners and on the establishing of a common language between tutors, content developers, designers, and trainees, regardless of national culture, which ultimately informed the design, development, and delivery of the course.

From the literature, however, four major issues, which would impact the course, repeatedly emerge: face, respect for authority, group over individual needs, and lack of autonomy. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the opening of China, various studies (Murphy, 1987; Cortazzi & Jin 1996; Ho & Crookall, 1995 as cited in Kennedy, 2002, pp. 431-432) have explored the perceptions of the Chinese learner as a passive, rote learner, who will follow the teacher uncritically and is lacking in autonomy in learning. The danger of this stereotyping clouding a first encounter with the Chinese classroom merits attention, as indeed any generalizations about a group of learners would. Whereas many of these features of Chinese culture, i.e., face, respect for hierarchy, group rather than individual orientation, and lack of initiative, were observed during initial contact with the trainees (exemplified by their stony silence in the introductory session of the F2F course), these surface observations were immediately questioned by the tutors.

With increasing contact in and observations of Chinese classrooms, re-focusing of attitudes begins to emerge in recent literature (cf. Kennedy, 2002 and Gieve & Clark, 2005). An example from a trainee's diary serves to illustrate this change:

I admire Prof. Z. greatly. He is the oldest and most respectable one in our group. [...] he still keeps on studying so hard. In my opinion, a professor, especially an old, respectable professor, need not attend such a training course [...]. In addition, to study together with young guys is something embarrassing [...]. However, he has the courage to overcome with all the determination and continues to study. I think he is one of the kinds of people I admire. Even though I don't know if I will have the same courage at his age, I will follow him.

Rather than only interpreting this as an example for the issue of preserving face and respecting age, the fact that an "old hand's" desire for self-improvement to serve his students better provided example and inspiration for the whole group.

Coupled with the example above was the first instance when the tutors asked the trainees to form groups for an exchange of experiences regarding language learning and the course syllabus. Surprisingly, and contrary to the anticipated "collectivist" behavior, the trainees were very reluctant to form groups. The main reason for this was the issue of face, as demonstrated by the trainee's diary entry above, yet, this block was swiftly overcome when the group followed the eldest trainee's lead.

Contrary to the many comments about the lack of initiative, rote learning, and cultural influences on learning (Kennedy, 2002, pp. 431-433 and Gieve & Clark, 2005, pp. 263-264) preventing Chinese learners from being

“active” learners, the trainees and tutors participated in many open and mutually productive discussions about these issues once the trainees had “bought into” the programme, thus confirming Kennedy’s observations about the importance of transparency and giving adult learners time to adjust to different methodologies before they adopt what is relevant to them (Kennedy, 2002, pp. 442). This would prove to be one key factor in the design and implementation of the CUTE programme.

DESIGN APPROACH

The design approach within the CUTE Project is fully integrated in the learner support methodology of the Language Centre. It had to answer the following key question: How to use the different learning environments in the most effective way? In order to answer this key question, an integrated F2F-online approach to the design and delivery of the course was adopted. The following principles informed the CUTE project:

- Skills according to the learning environment
- Clear visual presentation
- Clear and concise instructions
- Purposeful tasks
- Explanatory feedback
- Scaffolding (graded approach)

Since CUTE is an integrated online/F2F course, it was important to use each medium appropriately. Online delivery was mainly used for input (through authentic video/audio-based presentation of language, visualization, animation), thus receptive skills (listening and reading) were best served by it. Whereas the social environment of the classroom was mainly used for output (via role-play-type activities made to be realistic and relevant to learners’ interests), therefore serving productive skills (speaking and writing) best. Thus, there was a specific focus on what could be best done online and what could be best done in the classroom. The aim of the media design and the graded approach was, likewise, to provide the best learner support available to increase the effectiveness of the training.

COLLABORATION PROCESSES

Very early on in the project, the decision was made that both the content and the technical developments would take place in Cambridge in view of the fact that Cambridge had both the content and technological expertise needed. It was also decided earlier on that 2 Chinese staff from Tsinghua University would join the Cambridge Academic Team in Cambridge for 6 months to take part in the content development.

What followed was extremely interesting. 3 months were spent on discussing about methodology and what was meant by ‘learner support’ and by ‘scaffolding’ and how best to achieve the goals of the project. Decisions were made together, and the 2 Chinese colleagues facilitated quick decisions and rapid rectification of misunderstandings or mistakes. A better understanding of Chinese learners’ needs and how to serve them best could also be gained, while at the same time collaborating and developing a common language and methodology for the course.

One example illustrates this point well. The Chinese colleagues asked for every grammatical sentence used as an example and every activity instruction to be recorded, so that Chinese learners could get as much practice in listening skills as possible. To hear every sentence given as a grammatical example and out of context is something which trainee developers would actively be discouraged to do, as this does not constitute a ‘realistic listening situation’. Under the circumstances, i.e. the huge needs for listening practice even at such an advanced level, the decision was made to record every single sentence given as a grammatical example. However, it was also agreed that recording instructions, which by their very nature are meant to be ‘read’ and not spoken or read aloud, would be counter productive and would not serve any learning purpose. What was paramount was the benefits such a decision would have on the learners practically rather than being concerned about such an issue theoretically.

Collaboration happened between the Cambridge and the Tsinghua teams, between developers and trainees and also between the academic developer and the technical developer teams through regular e-mail and face-to-face meetings. Cambridge has always put collaboration based on dialogue and full participation at the centre of its many activities. By doing this, one understands each other’s language better and thus can communicate ideas to

each other more effectively. The developers (both academic and technical) are empowered to think for themselves and to signal immediately when things that have been agreed do not work well in practice or could be done better and yield better results for language learning. A team spirit has been fostered where everyone is both valued for their work and responsible for it. The end result of this approach to design and teaching is to provide the most comprehensive and the best learner support environment that can be achieved. This could not be achieved without the active feedback of the end-users – the trainees in Tsinghua.

NEEDS ANALYSIS AND TRIALLING

In order to ascertain the level of English language proficiency of the potential trainees for the CUTE 1 project and to identify needs, wants, attitudes, and experiences, the analyses carried out by the CUTE 1 team consisted of the following items and procedures:

- a reading and listening comprehension test for all trainees;
- writing a personal profile;
- filling in a multi-part needs analysis questionnaire;
- individual interviews with the trainees by the Cambridge team;
- focus group interviews with the trainees.

Prior to the CUTE 1 Cambridge team visit to Tsinghua in September 2003, potential volunteer trainees were given a reading and listening comprehension test. In addition, each candidate was asked to complete a personal profile of his/her academic background, experience in learning English, and personal goals for the course. These instruments were used to gain insights into the level of the individual trainee, to locate any areas of language weakness, and to highlight likes/dislikes in language learning experience.

A multi-part questionnaire was administered prior to individual 15 minute interviews with each trainee on the first two days, followed by focus group interviews after completion of the round of interviews. All of the tutors took notes on each candidate's oral performance and responses. These notes were compared and keyword analyses performed to highlight trainee needs.

The trainees' own assessment of their needs in answering the interview questions reflected their strong wish to express themselves fluently (43%), i.e., in giving lectures and presenting at international conferences, to write more effectively (27%), i.e., to increase their chances for international exposure through publications, to improve their skills to become more effective classroom teachers (18%), and, finally to improve their listening skills (12%) when listening to lectures, media, and informal conversation.

The results of the oral proficiency evaluation by the Cambridge team carried out during the interview showed that the teachers' speaking levels ranged from 2-4.5 on the ALTE scale. The teachers' listening test scores ranged from 4/40 to 19/40 and their reading test scores from 10/40 to 31/40 (representing a range of 1-4.5 for listening and 2-4.5 for reading on the IELTS scale). There were striking similarities visible between the results of the listening part of the practice test and the oral interview scores, which confirmed that listening and speaking were the most prominent skills requiring improvement among the participating teachers, as stated in their interviews.

Significantly, all the trainees demonstrated the same structural and grammatical weaknesses despite differing levels of proficiency in their writing samples, i.e., their personal profile. These problems coincided with common problems identified during the interviews by the trainees as being common to Chinese speakers/writers of English. These problem areas involve the use of tenses, articles, singular/plural agreement, phrasal verbs, prepositions, aspect, appropriate discourse expressions, conjunctions, connectors, discourse markers, question-answer structures, adverbs of time, redundancy, registers, as well as a desire to improve their pronunciation in order to be comprehensible to native speakers.

Discussion of the trainees' experiences with using ICT for language learning purposes constituted an important part of the interviews. The teachers' own experience showed that they considered the computer to be a useful tool in learning. Very few trainees, however, had actually had experience using a computer to learn languages. What little experience they had was usually confined to reading texts and searching for words in the Chinese/English online dictionary, and to the occasional use of CD-ROM language training software in self-study. Interactive, web-based support for language learning was unknown to the trainees, but they generally were intrigued with the idea and were willing to experiment with it.

The data gained helped define the trainees' needs and inform the course and material design and development process.

CRITICALITY AND REFLECTIVITY

Reflective practice was the basis for all collaboration and development during the CUTE pilot project and informed all pedagogical choices. The interaction with tutors, the tasks and the key language inspired the trainees to reflect critically on their linguistic habits, perceptions, roles, strategies and expectations. On the other hand, the tutors' critical reflection on the trainees' input influenced the development and delivery of the course.

Furthermore, the face-to-face component of the CUTE course was structured as a model of critical reflection, such that the tutors evaluated their teaching on an ongoing basis and the trainees evaluated their work both independently and with peers. The constant review and re-cycling of ideas and lessons learnt led to a deeper understanding of all the issues tangent to the programme. Two of these key issues, the role of the teacher and learner and the concept of online support materials, merit further elaboration.

In terms of roles, the teacher is still considered of primary importance in the classroom in China. Therefore, at the start of the July course, the trainees were most concerned about 1) making mistakes in front of each other, since they represented different statuses within the University teaching structure and there was the issue of saving face, and 2) making mistakes in front of their students. This led to long discussions about making students responsible for their own learning, and the trainees saw the benefit of sharing the skills processes and the concept of self-editing rather than just presenting classroom material ('knowledge') in English. They also found it a new and unique experience to be able to make friends with each other across departments, fields, and status levels through the CUTE project.

Regarding the concept of "online", it became apparent in the F2F training that, although the initial interviews with the trainees confirmed that they were positively motivated towards using online learning materials, discussions with the trainees revealed that, in spite of their involvement in the trialling and subsequent design changes of the online support materials based on their feedback, the concept of 'online' learning was and still remains a grey area for them. The way the Chinese teachers and project developers and the English native speakers define this concept is influenced largely by the way in which learning takes place in these different contexts. For example, at Tsinghua, online learning is seen as sharing information through email, forums, and the internet. Interactive learning is defined as transmitting lectures via satellite or through an online environment in video format. Thus, the activities in the modules were often referred to by the Chinese teachers as 'homework' rather than seen as personalised, 'interactive' skills and language practice. In spite of this initial attitude, the CUTE programme was successfully used by a majority of the trainees to improve their submissions for publication and their presentations in class and at conferences, as confirmed by post course tracking of individuals and through personal interviews and correspondence.

During the nine week online phase of the course, a majority of the trainees actively worked with, used, or selectively browsed the online materials in preparation for their presentations, papers, and teaching. Online tutoring through the online forum provided support and further opportunities for the trainees to discuss and reflect on their teaching and learning. A majority of the trainees (13/20) made active use of this possibility and added 75% of the content while the selection of topics were constantly browsed and read by all trainees. The issues of technical limitations such as off-campus access were not resolved and, along with pressing deadlines, teaching, and writing schedules, kept the numbers of users low. Feedback from the trainees, however, was very positive, and they saw the advantages for their own learning when using the materials.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The F2F component of the course was highly evaluated and appreciated by the participants, not only for the teaching and training, but also for the possibility for informal exchanges, tutorials, and supervisions. A definite improvement across the board in the trainees' language registers, pronunciation, handling of media, and organization of content was readily apparent after the F2F sessions and the on-line period.

There is no doubt that the most widely accepted part of the course was the F2F teaching, yet, trainees who browsed or worked with the programme found it useful. The on-line forum was also actively read and the few who were very active in the classroom situation were also active with their comments and postings in the forum. The numbers and quality of contributions and views were encouraging.

In their own words, the trainees responded to questions about the efforts of the tutors to make necessary changes to adapt the programme to their needs:

- This is a very useful course to me. Since I will start a bilingual course next term, this two-week course helped me so much. What I have learned from this programme is not only the skills of academic English, but also the teaching strategies.
- The most important thing I learned from this course is learning English with consciousness. Another point is only myself can help to develop myself.

In summary, as a result of the CUTE F2F/online integrated programme, the trainees' gained confidence in using English, improved their listening skills, developed and applied better process writing skills, gained a sense of community and friendship among their peers and with the tutors, and became more culturally and linguistically aware.

From the tutor's perspective, insights were gained into the Influence and prevalence of 'Chinglish' and the influence of cultural identity on language identity, as well as the Perceived roles of teachers and students and the Perceived roles of English in bilingual teaching. Ways of thinking about learning with technology were promoted through the design and implementation of the programme and the process of continuous improvement.

Both tutors and trainees learned many lessons concerning learning strategies, cultural influences and design and integration of online materials into a programme for academic English. The insights gained during this pilot project will prove invaluable as building blocks for the second phase of CUTE, which began in October 2005, where the focus will be on scalability and tutor training. Ultimately, the experience gained through cultural insights and online support materials will be used to develop a model for integrated F2F/online EAP course design for a wider and more diverse set of trainees throughout China and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Gieve, S. and Clark, R. (2005). The Chinese approach to learning: Cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme. *System*, **33**, pp. 261-276.
- Kennedy, P. (2002). Learning Cultures and learning styles: myth-understandings about adult (Hong Kong) Chinese learners. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, **21**, 5 (September-October), pp. 430-445.
- Lee, I. (1998). Supporting greater autonomy in language learning. *ELT Journal*, **52**, 4 (October), pp. 282-289.
- Thorne, Ch. and Qiang, W. (1996). Action research in language teacher education. *ELT Journal*, **50**, 3 (July), pp. 254-261.