Creating an online language resource

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ABSTRACT

As technology begins to play a significant role in educational programs in other sectors, many language practitioners and government agencies either reject the use of technology in language programs or fail to recognise the potential of technologies for expanding language-learning opportunities. This paper outlines the development of one particular online language program – Certificates in Spoken and Written English 2.0. It also discusses the lessons learned from the development process and previews future development opportunities.

Introduction

NSW Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) developed the nationally accredited Certificates I, II, III and IV in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) curriculum framework, which has become the most widely used language curriculum in Australia. The organisation also produces a range of print and audio-visual materials to support the curriculum and it was therefore appropriate for NSW AMES to look to the future of language learning and develop an online course. CSWE Online is a suite of courses corresponding to the first three levels of the curriculum framework. The courses respond to the needs and expectations of learners in today’s online world, where ‘they have high expectations about access to and use of computers and the Internet at various education and training locations and ... expect teachers and lecturers to have confidence in using technologies (Moyle and Owen 2009: 8). The Australian Government has embarked on a digital education revolution but there are still a number of barriers to overcome before the revolution occurs in the field of English-language learning.

Access to an online course provides broader study opportunities for students, including studying in a blended mode (where the online course is integrated with face-to-face tuition), in supported mode (where students have email or telephone access to an online teacher) and independent mode. In the blended learning mode, an online course can be used by students who need remedial, supplementary or additional learning. For remedial purposes, students who have failed assessment tasks can use the online resources within the course to improve skills and confidence through further exploration and practice before attempting another assessment. Other students may use an online course as a resource to supplement the work they are doing in the classroom, working with the same content or skills in different contexts or with a different focus, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of and greater control over the language. Learners who use an online course for additional learning may study different content or skills online to those they are dealing with in class, potentially accelerating the rate at which they develop their language proficiency. In supported and independent modes, students can work either with the support of an online teacher who monitors their progress and conducts assessment, or independently, using the online course to self-pace their learning. Overall, an online course allows learners to access tuition where it may otherwise be difficult or impossible (due to work or family commitments, distance from face-to-face provision or the absence of qualified local teachers) and enables extended learning opportunities.

21st-century adult learning

In the Australian post-compulsory vocational education and training (VET) sector there is an expectation that online learning will be part of programs. The most recent Australian Flexible Learning Framework national surveys of the use of e-learning by registered training organisations show that 36% of all VET activity now formally incorporates e-learning, a significant increase from the 3% to 4% of activity in 2003 and 2004 (DEEWR 2008). It is highly likely that this upward trend will continue, with further results.
indicating that close to 90% of teachers and learners identify some form of online activity as being part of the VET teaching/learning experience.

Overall, students’ and teachers/trainers’ attitudes toward, and experiences of e-learning in VET, demonstrate an underpinning acceptance and expectation of e-learning, often as part of a blended learning experience (DEEWR 2008).

There is also a policy expectation that vocational and language training will equip learners with employability skills. Learning in an online environment can contribute meaningfully to the development of technology and organisational skills, initiative and self-management – some of the skills that are seen to be essential in the contemporary workplace. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework surveys confirm this, with 62% of learners identifying increased confidence and improved computer skills as a result of e-learning (DEEWR 2008). Thirty-three per cent of learners believed e-learning and the computer skills they had acquired had already improved their employment outcomes, while 65% thought it would help them in the future to gain a better job, promotion or more responsibility (DEEWR 2008).

Most people are familiar, from formal education settings, with a pedagogical model where the role of the teacher/knower is to transmit prescribed subject matter to learners who bring little to the learning process, and who are motivated primarily by external pressures. As an alternative to this view of education, Knowles (1985) proposed that it was possible to make different assumptions about what adult learners were, or could become, when freed from a pedagogical mind-set. His proposed andragogical model suggests that adults are self-directed in their learning, as they are in the rest of their lives. Knowles sees adults as individuals with valuable life experiences who come to learning through a prompted need to perform better and who are oriented towards learning that is task- or problem-centred. For Knowles, adult learners have motivations that are partially or wholly internal, for example, a need for self-actualisation, recognition or self-esteem.

This view of learners as self-directing adults informed the development of the CSWE curriculum framework, which identifies learners as having:

- varying levels of proficiency in English. They have different kinds of knowledge and goals in relation to education, work and community involvement. They have diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds.
- They will therefore have different resources and needs for learning English, for learning through English and for learning about English (NSW AMEs 2008: 20).

The CSWE Online courses take up this view of learners and seek to engage them in an adult learning experience. They support individualised, flexible and active learning by allowing learners to work at their own pace, whenever and wherever they choose. While the content of CSWE Online may be constructed to guide or suggest a learner path through the course, it is ultimately the learners who will decide, according to their needs, interests and experiences, what they will study, in what way and for how long.

The course provides a characteristic e-learning environment where adult learners:

- can be continuously active, working at tasks that are tailored to their precise needs and levels of readiness.
- They can face challenges first-hand, practise as much as needed, and develop confidence in their ability to perform authentic tasks (Ellis 2004).

**Instructional design for adult language learning**

Approaches to curriculum and methodology have gone through various periods of change in the AMEP since the 1970s. In the 1970s and early 1980s the program was based on a centrally produced textbook, *Situational English*, with a strong framework of assessment. The 1980s was a decade of great change, with communicative language teaching becoming the dominant methodology (Brindley 1986) and the curriculum moving to a decentralised and negotiated model (Nunan 1988). However, by the late 1980s ‘it became clear that classrooms had become islands unto themselves and the individualised curriculum lacked continuity from one course to another, with students receiving little or no feedback on their progress’ (de Silva Joyce Symposium paper). Through the 1990s the AMEP moved back to a centralised curriculum model and today the curriculum provides a generic framework of text-based outcomes across four stages of development. At the same time as the AMEP moved back to a centralised curriculum, there was growing dissatisfaction with communicative language teaching as the underpinning methodology.
This coincided with explorations of ‘visible pedagogy’ (Bernstein 1990: 73) in other sectors of language and literacy education.

It is now recognised that language learners need some pathway into the language they are learning. In face-to-face tuition teachers are seen as fundamental in providing this pathway, with the understanding that adult learners can then begin to set their own goals, as this student explains:

If you’ve never learned English how can you have goals. These develop once you have some English (Burton 1991: 63).

An online language-learning course also needs to provide this guidance and it is important to have a framework of outcomes to be achieved, as provided by the CSWE curriculum. Just as in the classroom, an explicit pedagogic framework needs to inform instructional design and, in the case of the CSWE Online courses, the teaching–learning cycle (Burns and Joyce 1997), which has informed classroom methodology and provides a guide to developers and instructional designers. At each level within the CSWE Online courses, modules are constructed to encourage learners to engage with the material in a way that builds their knowledge of the field by exploring context and language before they read or listen to a model text. The contextual, schematic and linguistic features of the text are explored, analysed and practised through a variety of interactivities before learners attempt to jointly and then independently construct parallel texts.

Within each module learners can develop the macro-skills and language they need by choosing to explore and recreate texts that are relevant to them in workplace and/or community settings, as can be seen in the online menu in Figure 1.

Figure 1: CSWE Online module menu
Learners can identify and select what learning to undertake through a collapsible left-hand navigation menu that shows the content and structure of each part, or by exploring a dynamic page sorter that allows them to *flick through* the objectives and outcomes of each part of the module. The left-hand navigation menu also holds reference materials such as irregular verb lists and sound charts that can be accessed to support learning throughout the module, as seen in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: CSWE Online course reference material**
At a page/screen level, elements have been incorporated into the instructional design to allow learners to individualise how they interact with the material. Expandable word lists to support audio/video recording allow learners to identify and explore the meaning of the language items they are unfamiliar with. Similarly, in written texts, learners choose if they need to mouseover highlighted words and phrases to reveal definitions, as seen in Figure 3.

**Figure 3:** Word definitions are revealed through expandable menus or by rolling over highlighted words or phrases
Tip buttons can be clicked to reveal optional additional information about the topic, context, language area or study skills that are specific to the screen (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Tip buttons can be clicked to reveal additional information
Additional, and again optional, practice of language items or discourse features is held on tabs that sit behind the principle instructional screen.

Freed from the time constraints of classroom instruction, learners can engage with texts as frequently as they wish and can move through the program at a speed and to a depth that suits their own needs. The dynamic video and audio players used in CSWE Online support this by allowing learners to pause, rewind and fast forward. They also allow learners the option of viewing/listening while reading a synchronised scrolling and highlighted transcript (Figure 5).

Figure 5: CSWE Online video player

![CSWE Online video player](image)

It is important that online language learning provides learners with a rich variety of purposeful interactivity to encourage them to explore, analyse and practise language. The CSWE Online courses provide a repertoire of online actions including mouseover, click, drag and type. Mouseover, as seen in Figure 6, is used to reveal information such as definitions or a character’s background and to highlight text features.

Figure 6: Mouseover reveals information and highlights text features

![Mouseover reveals information and highlights text features](image)
Learners click to control video and sound players, choose answers, flip flashcards to show definitions and prompts, insert punctuation and chunk utterances (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: CSWE Online language learning interactivity**

By dragging items or drawing with the cursor, learners categorise language and ideas, match questions and answers or words and definitions, highlight words and sounds, and order sentences, ideas and events. Typing enables learners to note down ideas, plan for writing and speaking, and work with language at word, sentence, paragraph and text level. Feedback on learner performance is immediate, as interactivities self correct. For example, the pieces of a matching activity only interlock when the correct items are selected. Learners are also provided with exact answers and a score in multiple-choice quizzes or sample answers are provided for learners to compare with their own.

Review pages or screens at the conclusion of each part ask learners to evaluate their experiences. Across all levels, results on common questions have shown that almost 70% of learners strongly agree or agree that the course is interesting, 72% see it as useful and 65% feel the programs are easy to navigate. A generic question at CSWE I level asks learners to evaluate how much they have learned on a five-point scale, where one is *a lot* and five is *nothing*. Eighty-one per cent of CSWE I learners have answered at points one or two.

Given the rich variety of interactivity within the course and the demographic of its users, NSW AMES engaged an independent provider to evaluate the usability of CSWE Online through direct observation, user interview and eye-tracking technology. The independent evaluator was asked to assess “the extent to which [the content] is learnable and allows users to accomplish specified goals efficiently, effectively and with a high degree of satisfaction” (Miller 2005). All participants commented that the tool was intuitive and those who did need prompting on particular items found it easy to understand the principles and functions of the courseware.

**Lessons learned about online language course development**

Clarity in roles, expectations and shared documentation is key to an efficient e-learning production process. Typically, subject-matter experts (SMEs), who are generally not involved in teaching and learning, work with instructional designers to frame and shape their content into a format suitable for online delivery, and developers take that content and build it as it has been described to them.

Teachers clearly bring more to the writing process than most SMEs. As well as their subject expertise, they also understand the principles of effective teaching and learning. However, it is not necessarily the case that teachers have the expertise in instructional design that allows them to fully utilise the online environment. Consider, for example, the implications for writing, design and learner use around the fundamental issue of whether learners are working on a scrollable, top left to bottom right *page* or a multi-layered, tabbed non-scrollable *screen*. Developers, equally, are not instructional designers, and should not be expected to make decisions about content, layout and design as they build a course.
As with all processes, e-learning development demands discipline around how things get done. This means clarity around the concept and learning design, the creation of a library of page templates and interactivities that are aligned to specific objectives and uses, the development of complete storyboard/scripts and audio-visual assets, and the utilisation of a series of checklists and sign-offs, which keep the development process to time and to budget.

At the outset, it is necessary to establish the stages of the process and the deliverables that will be signed off at each stage, as well as a strict hierarchy of permissible changes. This helps to avoid feature creep, which is ‘the disease of we can make it better’ (LaBrosse 2009). For example, at the stage when storyboards or scripts are being reviewed there should be no backward-looking changes to overall concept or learning design. Similarly, when content has been developed and is being checked online it should be against the signed-off storyboards or scripts only, and not be taken as an opportunity to rewrite or redevelop content. There does remain space for creativity and innovation from SMEs, instructional designers and developers but this process must be separated from product development. Ideas for improvements and variations to existing learning items, as well as the development of new tools and approaches that occur during planning, writing and development, are prototyped for use in future products or revisions outside of the product development process.

At a learning level, module structure needs to be constantly under review. Through the development of the CSWE Online courses to date, it has been decided to encourage learners to pull (Kuhlmann 2009) content towards them by framing tasks and organising content to encourage them to seek and retrieve the information they find most relevant to complete a given task. In later module development it has been decided to place a greater emphasis on case studies and scenario-based learning and simple questioning and problem-solving at an interactivity level, supported by response-specific hints, tips and clues to guide learners towards understanding. For example, a learner whose response to a question is incorrect will see or hear additional information to help him or her attempt the item again rather than simply seeing the correct answer or being given a score out of ten.

Another further development will be the incorporation of mobile or m-learning elements that take content to learners ‘at the time and in the context of need’ (Carliner 2009). These will take the form of quick additional practice interactivities, checklists, reminders, quick facts and audio/video clips. For example, a learner who is waiting for a job interview could be using a mobile phone to watch a model interaction, and could be listening to and practising a series of responses to common questions or reviewing a checklist of things to say and do to get the interview off to a good start.

From an assessment perspective, work is currently underway to develop an integrated suite of online assessment resources to enable learners to study and be assessed wholly online. This will incorporate conventional discrete assessment tasks, as well as the collection of written and spoken evidence through online journaling and audio-video recording tools that contribute to an e-portfolio.

Recognising the diverse environments in which the CSWE Online courses are delivered and the trend towards increasingly blended modes of delivery, development is underway to provide additional support to teachers who may be less familiar with e-learning. This will include a guide that suggests how and when to incorporate elements such as chat, forums, discussion boards, wikis and blogs into the course. Additionally, utilising Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis, communities of practice will be established where teachers can swap ideas and information and access frequently asked questions.

The language-learning industry has a significant environmental footprint through the use of paper and photocopiers, and well-designed online learning courses can reduce this footprint.

**Conclusion**

In a recent survey of Australian students across all sectors of education, participants indicated that:

Technologies enable them to

- access easily, detailed information
- build skills through problem-solving
- develop maths, informational and other literacies
• practice tasks
• increase their and others’ motivation to learn through interest-focused and self-directed work
• improve the presentation of work including through the use of office productivity and multi-media software applications
• personalise learning that supports different learning styles and levels
• increase their control over their learning (DEEWR, 2009: 51).

It is important that the AMEP recognises the importance of online learning for adults who must participate in online environments outside the classroom. There is a need to move away from a simplistic view of the language classroom as a face-to-face concept. The 21st-century language classroom is a multi-dimensional and mobile concept where different modes of delivery can be integrated to the best advantage of students. It is also important to challenge the often unstated but common belief that AMEP students cannot make the most of online environments because they have limited English-language skills. This ignores the fact that AMEP students are accessing and utilising technologies in their first languages and want to be able to duplicate this use in English.

Curriculum and methodology in the AMEP have adapted to many changes over the decades and the online revolution will inevitably make its way into language classrooms and will change what we do (Rossett, 2006). However, it is important that language educators ensure that online courses, while providing new approaches, are firmly based on theoretical and practical understandings of language teaching and learning. It is also important for the funding organisations of language and literacy programs to recognise the potential of online learning and its importance for people preparing for community participation and employment.

**Note**

1 To view a demonstration of CSWE Online courses go to http://online.ames.edu.au and click on the course demonstration links.

**References**


