

FLEXIBLE AND OPEN LEARNING: DELIVERY ISSUES FOR STUDENTS FROM NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUNDS IN NEW ZEALAND

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Introduction

This study developed from the work of Baker and Panko into non-English speaking background (NESB) students' learning in traditional face-to-face courses, where they found that strategies of 'best practice' were not being widely employed by lecturers and institutions (Baker and Panko, 1998). It was realised that this situation might also pertain in the growing area of flexible and open learning and the aim of the current investigation was to examine the needs of NESB students from the perspective of both students and their teachers in this comparatively new environment.

In many traditional distance learning courses there has been gradual development of different types of material delivery as well as the steady expansion of interactive links within groups of students, and between them and their teachers (Nipper, S. 1989). Nipper contends that the first and second generations of delivery systems were concerned only with the production and distribution of learning materials. Communication with the learners was marginal and communication among learners almost non-existent. Not until the third generation when educational technology expanded did a range of communication modes become available as tools for enhancing interactivity. The findings of this study appear to show that the third generation may have been given insufficient priority in some teaching institutions.

Anderton and Nicholson (1995) carried out one of the few studies of the effectiveness of new technology as a means of encouraging provision of meaningful interaction between (NESB) learners and teachers. Based on a series of evaluations they concluded that:

Students, observers and lecturers were all very positive about the outcomes, citing increased motivation, enthusiasm and higher levels of interaction to support their claims. ... It has been seen that [using new technologies] course content can be extended to include valuable interactive tasks not available in present print and audio material.

(Anderton and Nicholson, 1995: 65).

In cases where NESB students were studying English, techniques such as audiographics, investigated by Anderton, were reported to have worked well. Some of the students' reactions are listed below:

- high levels of interest, motivation and interaction within the group
- opportunities to meet other distance learning students who can provide peer support
- opportunities for immediate feedback
- less self-consciousness than there sometimes is in a classroom group
- the association of images and concepts with oral language and text.

She also points out that students' inexperience with the technology did not pose any problem, although there were a number of difficulties getting the systems to perform correctly. When Anderton used videoconference technologies there were varied reactions, both positive and negative, and she concluded that videoconferencing might only bring limited benefits to students and a high level of stress to teachers. (Anderton and Nicholson, 1995)

Although ongoing communication between all students and their lecturers on flexible and open learning courses is vital to reduce feelings of isolation and diminishing motivation, for NESB students this of particular significance. The majority of Asian learners has previously relied upon teacher-directed instruction in which they have been expected to be taught and where the teacher holds the monopoly over the transmission of knowledge. (Farmer, 1994: 13) In contrast, a degree of autonomy is normally expected of students working within the western educational system. In order to make a

paradigm shift in their own learning strategies, NESB students require extensive teacher support, such as model answers and reassurance that the student is on the right track.(Gardner and Miller, 1994: 169) Two main aspects emerged during this study. The first, emphasised by the students, was their perception of the nature and relative value of mainstream course material, in particular conventional print-based methods of delivery. The second was the degree to which broader interactive communication between students and their lecturers was seen as significant from the differing perspectives of lecturers and students.

Procedure

Two focus groups were set up to gather information from students. Each was composed of Asian students from several different academic disciplines across the institution, and all group members were studying on courses where flexible and open techniques were used to deliver some of the contents. However, all were present on campus for part of their courses.

Both groups consisted of five students, all but one of whom were mainland Chinese, the single exception being Korean. At the beginning of each focus session, the students were provided with a list of seven flexible delivery techniques ranging from print-based lecture notes to computer-assisted teaching material, teleconferencing and e-mail. A list of topics is not normally associated with the focus group approach, but this was designed to overcome the language barrier and each technique was explained in full. A co-facilitator was also present to ensure that all exchanges were mutually understood, and any additional techniques not listed on the sheet could be examined in detail.

Students were questioned about their reactions to the various types of delivery they had already experienced and then asked to speculate on their reactions to the possible use of other methods in the future. Later, five lecturers in the same departments were interviewed using a semi-structured format to find out how they used diverse delivery techniques and whether they felt that these were managed differently by NESB students. They were also questioned about their plans for more flexible course delivery techniques in the future.

Findings

All students interviewed found that the techniques they had used in their programmes of study were contained in the provided list (see table 1). While recognising that ten students reflect only a small slice of the NESB population within the institution, they were selected from a range of departments known to be using flexible learning methods, and so appeared to represent the current situation under study.

Table 1.

Delivery technique	Students who have experienced technique
Printed material	100%
Video-based material	100%
Computer-based material (including CD-ROMs)	70%
e-mail (for communications with lecturer or other students)	40%
Internet (as an information tool)	30%
Audio-based material	20%
Teleconferencing (including Audio-, video-, and audiographics)	0%

Students' perceptions of delivery techniques:

There was total agreement amongst the students that clear, detailed, written material was the most successful teaching aid they received. Although some mentioned the considerable time they needed to spend reading notes or workbooks word by word, often with the aid of a dictionary, all reported that this long-established resource was the one upon which they still placed the greatest reliance and in

which they found the greatest value.

All participants in the study had also used video to some extent and while mainly it was considered to be a useful technique, demonstrating aspects of New Zealand life and work practices, it was regarded as a fairly trivial source of course information. This comment did not appear to have a cultural bias as most said they had found video a useful source of information when studying in China. However, when delivered in English, the speed of the spoken language also meant that much of the contents was lost, although several students commented that observing the speaker's body language did add clarity.

On the use of audio recordings, the only two students who had worked with this technique were both studying languages, an area in which this traditional method continues to be successful.

When examining the issue of computer-based techniques, including CD-ROMs and the Internet, only students in disciplines such as engineering and information sciences, where computer use was integral to the subject, used computers regularly. The majority had worked with them to a limited extent, but found that access was difficult as most stated that they could not afford a computer of their own. Furthermore, although several thought that on-line learning and recourse to information from the Internet was "the way of the future", at present the insufficient instructions provided were cited as preventing the full use of these resources. One student commented, "Sometimes (on Internet) there is too much information. It is like we are blind and cannot search for what is important." Another said, "I can accept it, but I do not think it would be an interesting way to learn." Many of the students also acknowledged that their basic difficulties with the English language prevented them from visually scanning large quantities of material in order to find potentially valuable data. The students from the language department, however, made good use of language CD-ROMs provided for on-campus sessions.

As an extension to computer-based technologies, e-mail as a communication tool was hotly discussed. Most participants felt it would be a valuable method of contacting their lecturers in their own time and pace, that they would be able to consider the replies in depth and that it would compensate for the lack of face-to-face instruction they had previously experienced. In particular, this method was perceived as useful for assistance with assignments. However, most said that although their course coordinators had provided e-mail addresses, in general they did not know how to use the system and were once again hindered by lack of regular access to computers. For the same reasons few of the students interviewed used e-mail as a tool for contacting their peers.

Finally, the concept of teleconferencing was greeted with general enthusiasm, although none had actually experienced it in any form. One student said "It would be great to be linked to American universities, like Harvard, and be able to join in their tutorials." Another added that it would overcome the problems of isolation and that in particular, "Videoconferencing would be good as a help to see others attitudes and body language." However, some placed a caveat on this method, fearing that their own inexperience in English would make synchronous communication too difficult. One student added that she would find it too difficult to contribute to any live conversations.

Lecturers' perceptions of delivery techniques:

All the lecturers recognised printed material as the foundation of their course delivery; however the majority also thought that all students were using computers extensively. In the courses where computer use was integral to the contents, students were expected to work with applications using the on-line help systems as their support mechanism. The teaching staff acknowledged, however, that even for native English speakers the language used within the help system was fairly obtuse. Extensive self-help workbooks had been devised to overcome these difficulties and provide backup to all members of a class, regardless of their origin.

Furthermore, on the computer reliant courses, staff did not believe that access to equipment was a problem. As one lecturer said, "Most of our Chinese students are on e-mail at home and correspond with each other all the time." Lecturers did not want students swamping them with e-mails and while they were willing to provide advice, they felt a limitation policy needed to be set up before students were encouraged to communicate to a major extent with academic staff by electronic means. However, the language lecturers realised the difficulties NESB students had seeking information on the telephone, both due to inadequacies of language and their difficulties with "politeness strategies" and considered that extended use of e-mail should be built into all courses.

Finally, all five lecturers interviewed stated that it was the intention of their departments to have parts of all programmes delivered via the Internet within the next two years. They did not know whether on-line delivery was intended to replace or complement face-to-face teaching, but suspected that replacement was more likely.

Aspects of current flexible education that enhance the learning of NESB students

Students' basic difficulties with the English language must be taken into account in the design and delivery of flexible and open courses, as many of the NESB students will have differing degrees of difficulties when learning in this language. An Australian study by Burns (1991), which involved self-assessment of a number of English competencies by students from Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, demonstrates the need to define the area in which students feel weakest: (See table 2) This work highlights the fact that half or more of the overseas students perceived their competencies as poor in all language areas with writing skills generating the highest percentages of poor evaluations. Reading was perceived as the least problematic skill of the four, a finding which has been born out by the present investigation.

Table 2. *Self-Evaluation of Poor English Skills* (Burns 1991)

Poor skill area	Percentage of Local students	Percentage of Asian students
Speaking	6	60
Hearing	5	64
Reading	13	48
Writing	16	70

These results underline the reason why traditional forms of distance education with its emphasis on the written word have been successful in the past with NESB students. This can be seen either in the paper-based or electronically-delivered content courses in which reading can take place at the student's desired pace. Even in interactive formats, such as e-mail replies or Chat sessions, time is still generally available for the less confident student to reflect on his/her answers before responding. Nevertheless, as reading speed is generally slow, especially in the earlier stages of students' programmes of study, too extensive a quantity of reading material could be seen as a hindrance.

Perhaps it is not surprising that NESB students find learning easier in the immediate area of language teaching. This is reinforced by students' responses that language lecturers in this study made effective use of language labs and multilingual CD-ROMs. It is also likely that further telecommunication techniques will not only allow learners to successfully practice their speaking and pronunciation in a variety of other ways, but also to receive immediate responses. However, it is anticipated that use of synchronous audio and visual communication will require additional strategies to be developed to enhance learning for NESB students on flexible learning courses.

A further advantage rendered by open learning is the requirement that all instructions have to be unambiguous, due to the absence of an up-front teacher. While this should be a fundamental requirement in all teaching situations, frequently it is not.

Flexibility and Interaction

For a course to be regarded as truly flexible it should permit learning to take place in ways that best suit a variety of learners; in other words, ideally '*distributed learning*' should be available (Freeman, M. 1997). However, in most cases, each element of a course is only available in a particular format; for example, compulsory parts may be taught on campus while the remainder is delivered via the World Wide Web or on paper. When applied to those NESB students whose previous experience has been restricted to teacher-directed education, this apparent limitation may be transformed into a positive advantage. Course designers operating with a reduced range of delivery choice are enabled to progressively encourage students to make the move to more student centred approaches by gradually introducing more interactive communication into their programmes.

The valuable potential of increased interaction between students and course co-ordinators at different sites was commented on one lecturer who worked with students on placement with industry. Under these circumstances students would be able to be supported over greater distances and their placements could be made in almost any area of the globe.

Conclusions

It would appear that while the delivery of course materials is regarded as satisfactory by NESB students, both in their quality and their depth, subsequent interactive communication with flexible and open learning students, of any ethnic origin, has to be focused on as a priority if it has not already been built into course design.

It is possible that requiring lecturers to focus on managing the learning of NESB students will ensure they examine the suitability of their overall teaching practice and since “good teaching practice in the multicultural classroom makes good teaching for all students” (Amir Salem, 1991, p3), this will benefit both native English speakers as well as NESB students.

This research paper advocates ‘best practice’ as a way forward for working with both NESB and local students. To support this advocacy, the responsibilities fall on both lecturers and their institutions. Institutions that encourage large numbers of NESB students to enrol in flexible courses must become develop principled ways of dealing with students, in particular with access to technology, effective training in its use, and support through the potentially alienating isolation that often accompanies independent learning. Furthermore, such institutions may need to consider the implications of supporting a flexible and open learning environment for students when they are developing their staffing formulae.

Recommendations

Strategies which could be incorporated into frameworks of open and flexible delivery:

- Provide adequate training to students in the use of any technology made available.
- Make access to technological facilities easy, especially those required as part of a course.
- Formally establish peer support groups in the course.
- Develop interactive communication systems as part of course design, using a combination of different technologies, such as e-mail and fax together with resources developed on CD-ROM or floppy disk.
- Use a mixture of more than one mode for conveying key course information and trial the different systems with pilot studies.
- Extend the chat system, which is then planned and managed to meet sound educational principles. This global system can be set up to make NESB feel less isolated; for example it allows the students to work with others from similar countries or disciplines in different countries, or links individuals with an international mentor prepared to offer support.
- Progressively develop the self-regulation of video- or audio-conferenced group work.
- Evaluate reactions of both local and NESB students.

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