



Specialist Language Courses

Classroom vs Online Learning

CAN THE TWAIN EVER MEET?

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Abstract

Many English language teachers argue that best classroom practice is built around student interaction, collaborative problem solving, task-based learning, expert feedback and explanation, and plenty of learning by doing. This is particularly the case for healthcare and other English for Specific Purpose (ESP) areas, where transferring classroom learning to work scenarios – often in high stakes conversations – is the focus point for course outcomes.

However, it can be difficult for ESP learners to consistently get to a classroom, and many turn to online learning, self-study in particular, where best practice appears to be characterised by rapid-fire ‘chunked’ activities, instant yes/no feedback, and zippy multi-media content.

Increasingly and perhaps unsurprisingly, ESP programmes now try to combine the two approaches and tout the joys of blended learning. But can classroom and online approaches complement each other, or is there necessarily a compromise? Can blended learning ever really work? As Rudyard Kipling famously wrote, are they as different as East and West: ‘*Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,*’ or, like the protagonists in Kipling’s poem, can they discover mutual respect and work together in common cause?¹

This paper explores this question using Medical English case studies as a focus point.

¹ First published in 1889, for the full version of Kipling’s *The Ballad of East and West*, see http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_eastwest.htm



Introduction

This paper examines best practice in both teacher-led tuition and online self-study, looking at their difference and similarities and the challenges faced by course designers and teachers working with the two areas. It then goes on to examine whether blended language courses can be created which enable the advantages of both to be optimised in a meaningful way.

My interest in classroom and online course design and teaching stems from over 25 years’ work in English Language Teaching. Over those years, I’ve run both an English school delivering face-to-face courses and an online teaching operation. My current company does both. I’ve tried to combine the two in programmes of varying complexity – for Business English, ESP, and exam preparation courses – sometime very successfully, sometimes not. My company, Specialist Language Courses (SLC) provides online Medical English courses for nurses, healthcare workers and doctors. We also teach doctors and nurses face-to-face, sometimes in physical classrooms, sometimes online in virtual classrooms.

This paper draws on my experience, interests, research and countless conversations with fellow English Language Teaching professionals over the years.



Course Objectives: Begin with the End in Mind

In practice, both face-to-face and online self-study courses start with the same objective in mind: learners should be able to use language better than when they started the course. They should develop better ways of expressing ideas, opinions and the world around them. This may be very specific, such as doctors aiming to deliver a paper at a conference or nurses wanting to pass an exam to work overseas, or more general, such as being able to communicate effectively with patients in a variety of situations.

So, before anything else happens, it is vital to understand what the learners need to achieve with the course. Once you have understood and analysed their needs, then you can begin to plan the course.

‘To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction.’

Steven Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989, p. 98)



Course Planning

Not surprisingly, curriculum design in both types of course follows a similar process. Start with discovering what the learner needs to do and then work backwards to analyse what needs to be done in order to enable the learner to achieve those aims.

Hilda Taba in her influential book, *Curriculum Development, Theory and Practice* (Taba, 1962), emphasised the following model, starting at the top:

1. **Diagnosis of needs**
2. **Formulation of objectives**
3. **Selection of content**
4. **Organisation of content**
5. **Selection of learning experiences**
6. **Organisation of learning experiences**
7. **Determination of what to evaluate and means to evaluate**
8. **Checking for balance and sequence**

This process allows the course designer to create a series of learning inputs and activities that, taken together, enable the learner to work meaningfully towards achieving their language learning goals.

So, the ends for both face-to-face tuition and online self-study are the same. What about the means? How do the two approaches differ in those learning inputs and activities?

'Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results'

Dewey, 1916

6 Face-to-face Tuition: Best Practice

These words were written by John Dewey, the hugely influential education reformer 100 years ago and inform much English language classroom practice today.

Best practice face-to-face tuition demands an active classroom, where students are fully engaged with the learning process. They listen, analyse, experiment, solve problems, collaborate, discuss, activate and contextualise new language, integrating it with existing language. In this scenario, teachers facilitate such activities, giving guidance, steering learners to think about language in new ways, inputting and explaining where necessary, giving feedback, managing the classroom and providing expertise.

In such a classroom, learners work with a range of inputs and tasks, from extensive work such as collaborative problem solving, building dialogues, or analysing films and documents, to short focused activities such as examining a particular piece of vocabulary or grammar, or correcting a persistent error. The teacher is able to draw connections between the different inputs and create a coherent learning journey for their students to follow.



7 Four Challenges Facing Medical English Classrooms

There are a number of key challenges the face-to-face course designer and/or teacher needs to work with. The first is *time*. Medical English students like many in ESP fields, are time-poor. They tend to be working professionals or vocational students who are busy, work unpredictable shifts and may have family commitments. The second is *location*. Getting to a classroom for specific days and times can be difficult as they may be working shifts or studying elsewhere on a tight time schedules. The third challenge is *technical or situational knowhow*. For ESP courses such as Medical

English, the students often know more about the technical side of language (diseases, treatments, and so on) or how language is used in practice, for example breaking bad news to patients, than their teacher.

In this way, the teacher has to learn about the realities of language usage from their students. The final challenge is *cost*. Simply put, paying a teacher to design and deliver an English course can be expensive, especially in comparison to online self-study alternatives.



Changing Educational Landscapes: the Rise of Informal Learning

Another challenge facing all teachers, irrespective of their subject, is the democratisation of knowledge and information via the internet. Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, online news sites, review sites, the rise of free MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) all mean that learner can access information within seconds on their mobile phone, tablet or PC.

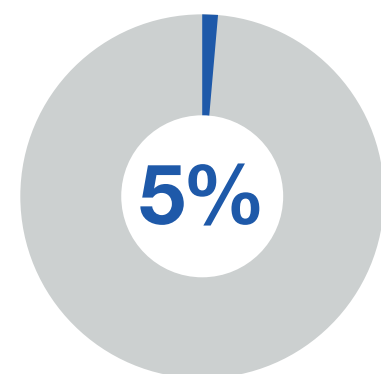
This learning is very different to the classroom practice described above, in that it is often unstructured, spontaneous, unpredictable, on-demand, portable, reactive and bite-sized. Learners are more digitally literate than ever before. Content provision is bottom-up rather than top-down. Teachers are no longer the main source of knowledge for their students. Type 'Medical English' into Google, and you'll get 1,100,000 results.

How teachers and course designers integrate the realities of informal learning into their courses is the subject of much discussion today, and certainly impacts on how online self-study courses are designed and presented.

Online Self-study: Common Design Methodology and Challenges

Online self-study used to be cassettes and teach yourself books. And before that, gramophone records. Some were very phrase-based, focusing on topics such as eating in restaurants, shopping and public transport, while others focused on grammar and discrete sets of lexis. Nowadays, self-study courses look very different. They include games with points and badges, video clips of recent movies, voice recognition exercises, and social networking. Most are aimed at smartphone users and promote themselves as on-demand, anytime anywhere learning. They are leisure-focused, not academic.

However, while they may look different, the methodology for the most part has not progressed much since the early days. Most current self-study courses rely on flashcards, matching words and pictures, or listening to a phrase and repeating it to your phone. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the greatest challenge language learning software companies face is one of engagement. Millions of learners may sign up but the dropout rates are extremely high. My company partnered with one such company and only around 5% of their registered users actually used their website to learn English (in this case).²



² see <http://backseatlinguist.com/blog/?p=135> for a review highlighting similar attrition rates for 2 well-known online language learning programmes among US government employees

Online Self-study: Emergent Best Practice

Clearly, therefore, best practice course design needs to focus on engagement. Content needs to be relevant above all. Learners need to have a good reason to stick with the course rather than click a button and go to Facebook, Instagram or YouTube – this is self-study's main competition. It is only recently that self-study course designers have started taking this on board.

Consequently, the content needs to be motivating, fun, and rewarding. Input needs to be varied, media-rich, and like a good game, challenging but not so much as to be off-putting. Exercises need to be short and focused with answers immediately available, together with the opportunity to try multiple times to get the correct answers. Increasingly, content needs to be adaptive, so adjusting to the level of the learner, collaborative and gamified. The linguistic context needs have 'high surrender value', so that the language learnt is quickly transferable away from the course and into reality. Our Medical English courses for example centre on a series of common interactions between nurses, doctors, carers, patients and patients' families.

One case study on another area of ESP, Aviation English, found the following to be true, highlighting the need for interaction:

'In terms of lessons learned, it became apparent during the development process that good online design includes interactive elements on every screen the learner sees. Whereas traditional book-based programmes can provide explanations and examples followed up by related exercises, online design precludes extended expository material and has very definite real estate limits.'

Beagle & Davies, 'Blended Learning for the aviation industry: A case study', (Davies, 2013)



Can the Twain ever Meet?

It is clear therefore that best practice in classroom-based tuition and best practice on online self-study courses is quite different.

Face-to-face	Online Self-study
Collaborative – pairs, small groups	Work alone
Teacher led	Materials led
Synchronous	Asynchronous
Extensive tasks	Short activities
Teacher listens and feeds back	Computer says right/wrong
Fixed materials	Reiterated, updateable materials
Not portable	Portable
Fixed times	On-demand
Fixed location	Anywhere with internet connection

These quite significant differences between the two approaches bring us to the question of how compatible they are in practice. Can they complement each other, or are they like East and West in Rudyard Kipling’s quote, and never the twain shall meet?

Where the Twain Meets: Blended Learning

Increasingly face-to-face tuition and online self-study are being brought together in language learning programmes. Face-to-face teaching organisations are using online platforms to host complementary materials such as homework tasks, additional resources or student forums. Online self-study companies use live teachers in virtual classrooms to give lessons to support self-study, adding structure and mentoring in order to maintain commitment to the online programmes.

Over the last 15 years or so, many companies have been creating blended learning programmes of different sorts, experimenting with input balances, content types such as pod- and video-casts, and different devices among others. Many early blends failed to work effectively as both students and, importantly, their teachers were not comfortable using online content. Connectivity was a problem, self-study tasks were limited in terms of variety and scope, and creating meaningful synergies between classroom and online tasks could seem contrived and problematic.

However, in recent years, blended language learning has entered the mainstream. Perhaps the most important factor here is internet speed. Better broadband and wireless connectivity mean learners can quickly access more sophisticated content such as video and audio files, do exercises, and read information wherever they are. Learning a language in this way has coincided with learning about many things in this way, from fixing a bike to self-diagnosing a medical condition to writing a contract to following elections to cooking a meal to discovering international customs and history. The list is endless.





Case Study 1: Blended English for Nurses

SLC recently ran a course for a group of nurses which combined the following:

- 2-hour face-to-face tuition sessions every 3 weeks in the hospital
- a 100-hour online Medical English course as the core course material
- an online learner platform where the teacher uploaded complementary materials and links to content of specific relevance to their area of clinical practice, including hospital forms and documentation

The nurses were all trained overseas and had an intermediate level of English. They were all identified by the hospital as needing greater communicative skills in order to deliver safe and effective care to the patients on the ward.

The nurses studied for around 10 hours between lessons using the online course and the teacher-provided materials. The lessons were then used as a forum for scenario-based practice, feedback and discussion.

Results: Learners were motivated, did the work and their ability to use the English required for clinical interactions improved significantly over the duration of the course (30 weeks). The client booked further courses the following year.

Case Study 2: IELTS Preparation for Doctors

Overseas doctors need a score of 7.5 in the Academic IELTS English test in order to work in the UK, with a minimum of 7.0 in each of the 4 papers. SLC has provided successful blended IELTS preparation courses to doctors in the Middle East, Far East, Africa and Asia. The courses consist of:

- 10 x 1-hour tutored sessions in an online classroom
- Support from an IELTS-specific online learning platform, including practice tests and paper-specific practice materials
- A published coursebook selected for the learner's specific needs, eg to improve their academic writing skills

Teachers were based in the UK and taught doctors remotely in a virtual classroom on a one-to-one basis. Schedules were agreed between teachers and doctors, so offering maximum flexibility. Between lessons, doctors undertook 8-10 hours of study and exam practice using the coursebook and online resource, as suggested and agreed with their teacher. Lessons were used to give feedback, discuss areas for improvement and input on language and/or exam techniques gaps.

Results: Doctors appreciated the personalised, targeted nature of the course, the flexible scheduling and the ability to study when they had time. Engagement levels remained high, pass results hit 80%, and the UK National Health Service now has more much-needed doctors working in it.

Blended Language Courses: 3 Approaches to Course Design

Language course designers have learnt lessons from the past and now take advantage of faster internet speeds and greater internet access via a proliferation of devices to think through what is possible in terms of designing blended courses. Three main approaches have emerged.

1. Supplemental

A supplemental approach emphasises face-to-face classroom tuition as the primary component, driving the course programme. Online self-study assumes a secondary role, and is used for deepening learners' knowledge by asking them to, for example, review/re-contextualise classroom inputs, prepare for upcoming classroom interaction, or for optional personal study.

2. Replacement

A replacement approach recognises the two inputs as being of equal importance. One approach may be more time-consuming than the other, but both are seen as working together synergistically to achieve the course objectives.

The much mooted 'flipped classroom' is typical of this approach, where students do extensive research and preparation or post-classroom reflection away from lessons on the one hand, and use the classroom as a space where they engage with the content on the other. In this way, online self-study consists of watching video lectures, reading documents and analysing ideas, while teacher-led classroom interaction is full of debate, collaboration and problem-solving as the work taken online is 'activated'.

3. Emporium

An emporium approach involves students working online, often in shared space such as a learning centre or library. The online resource is the primary driver of the course content. Learners are given the autonomy to work independently and flexibly, and should they choose, collaboratively. Teachers are enablers, on hand to suggest, mentor, guide and discuss.³

³ For more information and examples of these models see http://www.thecat.org/PlanRes/R2R_ModCrsRed.htm





One Rule Underlying All Approaches

Clearly there are different ways of designing blended learning courses. However, all of them are underpinned by one rule: adopt a principled approach.

It's vital that the desired learning outcomes are identified at the outset, as set out in Taba's Curriculum Development, Theory and Practice. This then informs the balance of face-to-face and online and enables the course designer to create a coherent programme that meets the challenges of time, place, and budget, and of creating content that is relevant, fun and motivating.

A course designer needs to ask all the questions raised earlier on in the paper, perhaps more:

What does the learner need to do with the language?

What content does this imply?

What inputs do they need? What order should they go in?

What's the lead delivery mode, if any?

What about the underlying pedagogy?

How much time do your learners have?

How long will classroom and online sessions last? How often?

What level of student autonomy is preferred?

Which elements are compulsory, which are optional?

Where will the learning take place?

What interactional patterns do you want to encourage?

What are the primary and secondary roles of teacher and students?

What level of support do students using blended learning need? What about teachers?

How will you evaluate course effectiveness? How will you track and report progress?

How will the course be reviewed and improved?

Face-to-face and online need to be understood by both teacher and learner as adding value to each other. If they are not seen as complementary, then courses run the risk of having the opposite effect; of being seen as confused and ultimately become demotivating, with online activities seen as a gimmick with no real value.

Yang stated it well, when he wrote *"effective implementation of technology is not accomplished just as an 'add-on' to existing tools, it must be synergised into the language learning environment with the support of surrounding educational systems"* (Yang, 2001)

Teachers therefore need to share the course objectives with the student and explain how and why a blended approach has been adopted. In reality, this is an ongoing dialogue, adding depth to a course and the sense of a shared journey. While not always easy to get right, when it works – and we are getting better blended course design – it becomes a powerful language learning tool in language learning, and in some ways nowhere more so than ESP and Medical English courses.



Specialist Language Courses

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