

Content management for distance learning program: A case study on a distance learning program in Thailand

Chan, Sow Hup

*University of Macau,
Macau SAR, China
joanne@umac.mo*

ABSTRACT

Institutions are considering distance learning to meet the ever expanding needs of students in many parts of the world. Due to the lack of face-to-face contact with teachers and peers, the emphasis on content management is vital to assure positive learning. The purpose of this paper is to derive lessons learned from the findings of a case study on a distance learning English Language program, and to highlight the impact of what can possibly happen when content management seemed to be nonexistent. The paper will provide some practical suggestions for educators considering course content management. The importance of evaluation and benchmarking in knowledge sharing is stressed. Much knowledge can be gained from such effort. Proactive measures taken can enhance the institution's reputation.

Keywords

Content management, distance learning program, quality material, knowledge

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education has centered on academic centers such as colleges and universities for a long time. Teachers and students who gather in these facilities, either formally or informally, have the opportunity to share their knowledge and to socialize. However, a large population in many countries either cannot afford to structure their lives around the fixed schedules of these academic centers or live too remotely from these centers.

With existing telecommunication infrastructure, learning is no longer confined to or experienced in classrooms. An increasing amount of teaching and learning is happening through media other than the face-to-face contacts which take place in a classroom or lecture theatre. The term "distance learning" had since been used to cover the broad range of teaching and learning events in which the students are separated from the instructors, or other fellow learners by time and space.

Distance learning is quickly becoming the education of choice for many people around the world. It is also an appropriate approach for meeting the ever expanding needs of students. Learning courses may be offered through correspondence, workbook, video, CD-ROM, cassette tapes, or mass communication channels. In recent years, other medium of education delivery include the Internet-based and interactive television technology. Combinations of methods for delivering courses such as using the Internet, video and CD-ROM are also on the rise. These learning medium are readily available to students. It allows "students to work at

their own pace and plan their study programmes on an individual basis" (Lucas, 1994:125).

In Thailand, English Language is the main foreign language for international business. It has been taught as a second language in many schools, including those in the rural areas. English Language is a core subject aimed at developing four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These skills are necessary because many textbooks and useful reference material in most specialist area are written in English. Students must also prepare for their future careers in the business sector, especially in terms of international exchange in the business environment. The teaching of English Language should therefore serve the functional, occupational, and instrumental needs of the Thai students and professionals.

The purpose of this paper is to derive lessons learned from a case study on a distance learning program that could be useful in course content management. An emphasis on quality material is made. Additionally, the importance of evaluation and benchmarking in knowledge sharing is stressed.

1.1 Distance learning English Language program

There is a need for good English Language teachers in Thailand. While there is a huge supply of teachers who can speak or communicate in English, only a very small percentage have the competencies and experience for teaching the language. Many primary and secondary schools in Bangkok are still contracting private language institutions

to fill the need in language teaching. Schools located in the rural or remote areas, however, have to depend on their existing teachers, many of whom are not proficient enough to teach the language, and require remedial language training themselves (Chan, 2001).

Since quality educational material and resources are not readily available, the newspapers, radio, television and the internet play a major role in the English Language acquisition for the Thai's. For example, regularly scheduled programs through satellite are considered as an alternative form of education delivery especially to learners who are remote from the primary educational institutions and teachers. In particular, distance learning methods, based on television is a very popular mode of delivering education to the rural people (Chan, 2002; 2004). Instead of traditional classroom delivery, teachers are now seen "live" on television and students are in virtual classrooms. As described by Wolfendale (2002), "In each classroom, there are two television sets screening distance learning from the Wang Klaikangwon palace school in Hua Hin. In a land short of qualified teachers, it's an ingenious way of providing quality teaching."

Learning is the process of acquiring knowledge (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 1999). With distance learning through television (DLTTV), thousands of students can learn from an experienced teacher simultaneously irrespective of where they live. The distance learning technology also help to eliminate the problems associated with sending English Language instructors to remote places including accommodation, safety, and the unwillingness to be relocated. Furthermore, this education delivery mechanism can make it possible to maintain consistency and standardization of materials throughout the country (Limpaphayom, 2001).

DLTTV programs give every individual "the ability to be a continuing and lifelong learner" (Dyrli and Kinnaman, 1995:88). Specifically, the DLTTV's English Language program offer opportunities to:

- those with limited English language ability;
- those who seek alternative education through distance learning;
- those with limited time and budget to acquire English Language communication skills;
- students with physical or time constraints that make traditional education inaccessible;
- adults who were unable to attend private English Language classes due to work or family commitments, lack of transportation, and other obligations;
- those living in remote communities which has no budget or instructors to provide adequate

support for learning English Language in a formal classroom setting;

- the poor and disadvantaged groups with limited access to the education system due to poverty;
- those who drop out of the formal education arena and begin to educate themselves informally;
- those who had once completely eliminated the option of furthering their education; and,
- rural and urban schools faced with the increasing challenge of providing students with low-cost but high-quality English Language instruction.

The idea of learning English through television in the comfort of the learner's home is welcome by many city people who wish to acquire informal learning. Working adults who realize that they cannot afford to pay the price for not being able to communicate in English can also benefit from the programs.

1.2 Distance learning English Language material

Discussions on why good teaching materials matters are not new. According to Krashen (1985:4), "people acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input 'in'." Besides, good quality and appropriate language materials are necessary for several reasons. First, most learners study independently, and have no input or feedback in the material they obtain from the distance learning program. Second, in rural or isolated areas, the learning program is the learners' only teacher as they have no language teachers in their community. Third, and most importantly, learners can acquire the language skills only when they have appropriate comprehensible material.

Additionally, helping the independent distance learning learners to gain proficiency in their spoken and written English is a challenge. Their prior knowledge can greatly influence their comprehension (Pearson and Dole, 1987). The distance learners can develop their vocabulary through wide reading (Nagy and Herman, 1987). However, with limited access to literature and useful English Language material, particularly in the rural areas, their English Language vocabulary must be learnt from the distance learning program.

Furthermore, distance learning material has often been used alongside conventional teaching. Instructors can use taped recordings of the programs as supplementary material in teaching English as a second language (ESL). The recordings are suitable for young language learners since they have short attention span (Bouman, 1990), and different learning styles (Othman and Abdullah, 1998). Independent

learners who had recorded the program in videocassette tapes can also study at their own pace. The recordings can facilitate revision as well. The independent learner's control can help them to learn better (see Perlmutter and Monty, 1977; Gary, 1987).

Developing instructional materials is a formidable task (Campbell, 2000). One guiding principle in materials development is to avoid reinventing the wheel. As indicated by Walandouw and Penrose (1994:66), "Language materials have many facets. They reflect an approach to language learning, a cultural environment, a type or range of student, and a learning/teaching environment." Therefore, a lot of effort must be put into producing the learning materials since quality material is useful to ensure good learning (Chan, 2004).

1.3 Content management

Institutions developing distance learning programs must consider various issues including course standards, curriculum development and support, course content, and course pacing. Content management in particular is necessary because the content or the message is considered as more important than the medium in education (Clark, 1983; 1994). The medium is not the message. The medium is the vehicle carrying the content. Thus, it is the content that is more important in learning. This view has been supported by many scholars (see Sherry, 1996; Willis, 1993).

Improvement in learning can be achieved by improving the content. Managing the content of what is actually delivered to distance learning students for example is important for several reasons. First, careful attention must be paid to the quality of the material presented in distance courses (Galusha, 1997). Second, course content cannot be ignored in any theoretical or practical consideration of distance education attrition (Bullen, 1996). Third, it is the responsibility of program producer that the quality of the program should be carefully controlled. More importantly, the reputation of the institution will be at stake especially when substandard programs are produced.

Conventional knowledge suggests that content management should be common in distance learning programs. However this assumption lacks empirical testing. Besides, little is known regarding whether the use of content management is actually implemented or incorporated in distance learning programs. Thus, the primary purpose of this paper is to report the result of an investigation on this assumption. Specifically, to what extend is the Modern English Show, a distance learning English Language program, suitable for independent learning by distance learners, will be examined.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Random samples of the material presented to the distance learners were collected over several weeks in the month of August 1999 by taping the Modern English Show, a distance learning English Language program as it was televised to the audience in the author's home. The recordings were then transcribed for analysis. Recording the program during the time of transmission is necessary in order to capture the exact content and quality of material the learners were getting. The reason for the purposive selection of Modern English Show was two-fold: a) the program utilizes both the Thai Language and English Language; and b) the program incorporates a variety of teaching activities.

This sampling approach has advantages. One advantage is that it allows the author to obtain material on what is actually delivered to the distance learners. Another advantage is cost as it only requires the effort of the author in taping and analyzing the recordings.

3.0 RESULTS

This section provides a brief discussion on the findings of the case study. Insights are offered because it relates to course content management and it highlights the necessity of content management.

3.1 Findings from a case study

Qualitative observation of the Modern English Show, a non-interactive television program, reveals several concerns. Themes representing misrepresentation, mispronunciation, improper language, poor visual aids, poor explanation, and poor interviewing skills were found in the distance learning program. The quality of the overall instruction is found to be low, poorly conceptualized, of questionable reliability and thus, the question on the suitability of the program for independent learning by distance learners (Chan, 2001). Specifically, the analysis showed that

- good casting should be chosen for the program;
- quality of material could be improved further to assure positive learning;
- selection of guest need to be scrutinized further to determine the guest's language skills before recording the program; and
- the same faculty or teacher who teach the classroom course (conventional instruction) should develop the distance learning course material (distance instruction) (Chan, 2001).

In the following paragraphs, the author will use the analysis from the last segment of the program on “an interview with a special guest” to illustrate some of the points mentioned. Discussion related to the findings will be provided. While the approach taken may provide some insights, it is included to highlight the impact of what can possibly happen when content management seemed to be nonexistent, and to demonstrate the effect on learning.

3.1.1 An interview with a special guest

The purpose of this segment is to help distance learners apply the content presented in the earlier part of the program. This particular segment is one of the five segments which make up the entire 50 minutes long program. The people involved in this segment or section include the program presenters and an invited *special guest*. Basically, learners can learn how to

- ask questions,
- have a conversation, and
- acquire interviewing skills.

Example 1: Transcription of communication between the presenters and guest A

G:	<i>I'm from Bangkok.</i>	L1
FP:	<i>Bangkok, Thailand.</i>	L2
MP:	<i>That's very close to Hua Hin.</i>	L3
G:	<i>Yes.</i>	L4
FP:	<i>And... where do you study?</i>	L5
G:	<i>I used to study in Singapore.</i>	L6
FP:	<i>Wow.</i>	L7
MP:	<i>In Singapore? That's the first guest we have from Singapore. A new guest.</i>	L8

(Note: G=Guest, FP=Female Presenter, MP=Male Presenter)

If we look at the transcription shown in Example 1, we need to ask whether learners were supposed to assume

that the guest *is* a student when there is no mention of it in the earlier part of the interview. Besides, “Where do you study” is not a clear question to the guest, leaving the guest to state her response freely. A more appropriate question could be “Are you studying now? If so, where do you study?” or “Where are you studying now?” or “Could you tell us where you studied previously?”

An important point that merits discussion here is that learners were misinformed that a person who used to study in another country (Singapore) can be categorized as a person from that country (Singapore). To illustrate this point further, it is certainly not true that an American who has previously studied in Thailand is from Thailand! There is a clear distinction between one who has visited a certain country or spent several years in a particular country, and one who originates from that country i.e. nationality. These distinctions were not made in the program. Furthermore, *That's the first guest* as shown in L8 should be replaced by *You are the first guest*. More importantly, the male presenter showed that he was not listening. As indicated in L1, the *special guest* was from Bangkok.

This example clearly demonstrates poor listening skills and interviewing techniques on the part of the presenters. It was also apparent that certain *special guest* might not have sufficient vocabulary in English to answer questions given by the presenters.

An example of a bad interview is also observed in another interview. The following describes the transcription of Example 2. First, the presenter asked the question incorrectly. Second, the guest did not answer the question.

Example 2: Transcription of communication between the presenters and guest B

FP:	<i>What do you do for the living?</i>	L1
G:	<i>I am an employee of Stamford International College.</i>	L2

Article *the* in L1 of Example 2 should be replaced by *a*. Alternatively, the presenter could ask, “What do you do for *your* living?” The guest gave a vague answer in response to the question, which was not followed up by the interviewer. Is *employee* a profession? What does an *employee* actually do on the job? Were learners supposed to know exactly what this particular *employee* does for a living? Or were learners supposed to remember the face of the guest and assume that they have prior knowledge of his profession?

Besides not learning what the guest does for a living, learners were also not able to learn good interviewing techniques. The presenters did not follow-up on questions that were not answered. They could overcome the above situation by guiding the interviewee along by saying, for example, “So, you work for Stamford International College. Could you tell us about your job title and what you do at work?”

Furthermore, learners trying to improve their listening and grammar skills from the *special guest* section will be disappointed to pick up incorrect grammar or vocabulary such as those shown in Example 3A, 3B, and 3C.

Example 3A

G: *Many kinds of restaurants. You got a bunch of tourists.*

Example 3B

G: *It's depend. It's depend... like um... what is that subject is, is that interesting me.*

Example 3C

G: *Favorite subject, well... I haven't figure it out yet ... because I don't think... there haven't been any subject that interested me.*

In example 3A, “You got a bunch of tourists” should be replaced by “You have a lot of tourists.” Example 3B could be replaced by “It depends. It depends on the subject; whether it is interesting to me.” Example 3C could perhaps be replaced by, “Favorite subject, well, I have not figured that out yet because I think there are no subjects that interests me.”

3.2 Content management issues in the distance learning program

Actors and/or actresses chosen for the drama in the Modern English Show and the presenters should be fluent in

the spoken English Language. In addition, they should be able to pronounce all the words in the script clearly and accurately. Clarity is vital because learners are learning pronunciation from those acting out the drama and from the presenters (Chan, 2001). Mispronunciation for words like *tired* for *tied* is a serious problem for Thai students because there is no “r” sound in the Thai Language. Such mispronunciation in the program could lead to negative learning (Chan, 2001).

It is also evident from the findings that quality may vary considerably among programs, to the extent that errors in the program could lead to incorrect responses such as “what does a boy wear when he go swimming.” Learners’ activating inappropriate schemata, for example, swimsuit for both males and females may arise as a result of learning from the program. This new “data” (swimsuit for males) will not be consistent with the learner’s belief that is previously learned from other English Language programs, or those given by their teachers in a classroom environment. When this happens, it may prove frustrating for some learners or damage both motivation and esteem of the learners. For other learners, however, the association of a male wearing a swimsuit to swim, or *I am from America* since I have studied in America, for instance, may be permanently stored in their vocabulary until they are corrected.

In other words, the findings showed that some of the programs are not as effective in transferring knowledge to the learners, and *may* perhaps give rise to a negative influence in the learners’ learning (Chan, 2004). Negative learning and negative influence can be avoided when content management in terms of evaluation and benchmarking is in existence.

4.0 RECOMMENDATION

Specific measures should be taken to raise the quality of the distance learning program. In order for the program to be useful, it must meet the educational goals of the institution and the needs of the distance learning students (Chan, 2004). Additionally, the stakes are high when attention on instructional content is not of high priority.

It is important for educators to provide quality education. The first step to develop a strategy and specific measures to obtain and use knowledge effectively is to identify the barriers for the ineffective content. Questions raised at this stage may include “Is it the resource constraints?” and “Is it the skills or necessary experience that is lacking?”

It is also essential to measure the effectiveness of the learning program. One possible way to ensure education is effectively imparted and to carefully control the quality of the

program is to embrace content management. Measures such as evaluation should be implemented. Evaluation can be used to determine whether goals and objectives are met. Indeed, evaluation is an essential component of any distance learning program as a means of monitoring results and assessing its success (Tarr, 1998).

The evaluation of instructional content can and should offer guidance to aid improvement and development at a number of levels including

- the current program for current learners,
- the current program for future learners,
- future programs for future learners,
- the open learning team, and
- the organization as a place of learning

(Rowntree, 1992).

If objective evaluation is not introduced, knowledge will not be gain. Educators can also draw from the broader TQM philosophy and apply its essentials to teaching (Babbar, 1995). Furthermore, benchmarking is a valuable tool to continuously improve all processes in an organization, and empower all work groups that want to take control of their own jobs (Sillyman, 1992). The benchmarking principles can be applied to identify good teaching practices. Implementing these measures can not only help educators to continuously improve but also encourage the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experiences as well as learning from one another.

Although sharing knowledge does not come easily (Paul, 2003) these proactive measures can enhance the reputation of the institution.

5.0 LIMITATION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Limitation

The data in this study were collected from *one* distance learning English Language program in Thailand over a one month period. Thus, generalizations to other programs and settings should be made with caution.

5.2 Conclusion

Qualitative observations regarding the Modern English Show provide valid grounds for concern. Content management can be extremely beneficial, not simply to improve course content, but more importantly, to share knowledge. When properly planned and implemented, content management can be a significant step towards addressing problems like those identified in the distance learning program. Initially, teachers and educators may have anxieties about how to manage their course content. However, once they have the commitment and learn how to manage

their course content, they simply have taken the proactive actions necessary to create, share, integrate, and use knowledge and most importantly, enhance their institution's reputation.

To conclude, institutions like those producing the Modern English Show indeed have a long way to go on their knowledge journey. Although the program is no longer televised by Distance Learning Television Station, it is critical that educators produce helpful programs for distance learners.

Distance learning can be the obvious choice to meet the educational needs of the students, and the challenges confronted by urban and rural schools to provide students with low-cost high quality educational services (Chan, 2004). This study lays the foundation for further work in content management and knowledge sharing to assure quality learning programs. In this vein, future research on distance learning programs should devote attention to content management. Additional research is also needed in how students evaluate their distance learning program. Such findings would be valuable to the distance learners and the institutions producing the learning programs.

Endnotes.

1. The Modern English Show was produced by a legitimate private institution for higher learning in Thailand.

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