

New Media, Mixed Media and the Middle Path of E-Learning

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This paper describes how English language education, especially commercial English education, is increasingly being influenced by business practices from other commercial enterprises and how it represents a further erosion from principal based teaching (Levitt et al., 2005) to rule based teaching.

1. Introduction

For the past ten years the potential of information technology (IT) has promised to revolutionize education. IT promised individual attention, personally level adjusted materials, an answer to the problems of large classes and little face-to-face teaching time. Much of this potential has been unfulfilled. Many teachers feel that realizing the potential of IT is ten years in the future and always will be.

Initially, IT focused on drill type activities with self-correcting vocabulary and grammar activities. These prescriptive type activities have been supplemented by new developments in IT. Blogs, wikis and discussion boards offer the promise of more productive activities where students can express themselves rather than simply answering drill questions.

Recently another trend has appeared in the e-learning community and has been particularly embraced by commercial language schools - mixed learning. Mixed learning combines a number of online activities where students independently study and practice lessons focused on

the language points that the course requires and after a certain amount of time has passed, students then are given a communicative test to determine whether they have mastered the language point or not. This test is given by a human teacher, not by an e-learning computer. These tests usually take the form of interviews or writing assignments.

This combination of human and online learning is beginning to be adopted by commercial language companies and shows a dramatic shift in the use of e-learning materials from what was their original home – universities – to the commercial sphere. Concurrent with this shift from educational institutions to commercial institutions is the shift of focus from the experimentation and learning of universities to the for profit motivations of companies and commercial enterprises. Commensurate with this shift to for profit, is the adoption of management techniques used by other for profit institutions – particularly franchises.

Franchises are characterized by their dependence on unskilled, inexperienced labor, their desire to provide a product of uniform and unvarying quality and a desire to compete directly on price.

This paper will briefly report on the mixed e-learning activities in the US and European markets and then recent developments by three commercial language schools operating in the Japanese market: E-communication, AEON, and Westgate. After briefly outlining the backgrounds of these companies, this paper will describe their use of material and explain the implications for ESL teachers in general and university English education in particular.

2. Background to the US Companies

One of the best known names in foreign language e-learning is Rosetta Stone. Rosetta Stone makes foreign language software based on the US State Department foreign language teaching methods using audio lingual methods. Students use CD ROMs. They learn vocabulary and grammar patterns by using a microphone to input their voice and compare their

speech to the native speakers'.

Most of the US online learning programs follow the Rosseta Stone pattern and so it is useful to spend a minute to outline what the materials look like. As mentioned before, the lessons are very influenced by the audio-lingual method. The students' native language is avoided or not used at all. In a typical lesson, students are shown four pictures. For example, students are shown a picture of a man, a woman, a boy and a girl. The lesson begins with the student reading or hearing a word or expression that describes one of the pictures. For example, the students will hear the word, "boy" and must select the picture of the boy. When they hear the word, "girl" they click on the picture of the girl and so on.

After students have learned the new vocabulary, more complicated grammatical patterns are associated with the pictures. For example, the student will hear or read, "I am a boy" and or empty speech balloons will be added to the pictures and the student will hear or read, "I am a boy" or "You are a girl" and again they will have to select the appropriate pictures. The pictures and grammar patterns build up as the student demonstrates proficiency and can reach quite complex levels.

The software is available at retail outlets and online stores and sells and usually sells for around USD500.

In addition to the CD ROM based learning system Rosetta Stone now offers a mixed media program called Totale. Totale costs USD1000 product and includes RosettaCourse, the CD ROM based learning system; RosettaStudio, an online chat room where students can meet and interact with native speakers via video chat; and RosettaWorld, an online community where students can play language-related games with other students from around the world.

Rosetta Stone uses the native speakers and live teachers to enhance the digital experience. They do not evaluate the students' language, but simply offer further opportunities for practice.

Another company that does offer personalized feedback is the recent US startup LiveMocha.com. LiveMocha offers free basic level language

courses and after completing those, students can upgrade to paid, advanced classes. In addition to the classes, for \$20 a month, students can turn in up to eight voice recordings to a native-speaking teacher, who will review, explain errors and what the student should do to improve. For very keen students, LiveMocha offers a six month, USD70, program where students can turn in up to two examples per lesson for feedback. LiveMocha claims to have over 5 million registered users.

2. 1 European Companies

The cost of these programs is an important element that will be discussed later in the paper. Before we do that there is one more low cost alternative that should be discussed – Babbel.com. Babbel is partially sponsored by the European Union and offers web-based lessons for European languages – English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The lessons cost USD12 a month, but for students willing to make a six-month commitment, the price drops to USD6.62.

Babbel.com offers the opportunity to speak and interact with other learners of the same language and the chance to speak with native speakers, but there is no feedback and all evaluations are carried out by the software.

2. 2 Japanese Companies

First, e-communication is a Tokyo based language school. According to their company profile, they currently offer tuition to only 900 students, mostly business people. They recruit teachers to provide online lessons from their homes using the Internet telephony software, Skype, and their own proprietary software. Information regarding the number of employees was not available, but e-communication is currently recruiting teachers for several foreign languages, not just English. They also recruit teachers for French, German, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Hindi, Tagalog, Vietnamese and Japanese.

E-communication does not have a homepage, but the salary offering of

its help wanted ad, YEN2000 – 2,500, which is line with the salary offered at commercial language schools, so we can surmise that teacher feedback to students is an important element in their program.

AEON is a nationwide chain school with branches at nearly every train station in Japan. There are over 300 AEON branch schools teaching English within every prefecture in Japan. AEON employs 800 teachers and 3000 staff, an interesting ratio that will be discussed later. AEON was founded in 1973 and describes itself as an “innovator” in English education. The main focus of their business is individual lessons for adults. A growing segment of their business is their kids business and their mixed media program. Details are sketchy, but it seems that the AEON online program is similar to the US based online services. Students are given access to online materials for studying pronunciation and grammar points free of charge. For YEN2310 students can have a one to one video-conference lesson with a native speaker. This price is not so different from a private lesson with a private tutor and the materials are similar to the materials AEON uses at its physical schools.

The final Japanese company I want to discuss is WestGate. Westgate describes itself as “a force” in changing English education in Japan. According to the Dave’s ESL Café, a recruiting site for English teachers, Westgate is the most prolific poster of jobs for Japan. Westgate posted 96 ads for jobs in Japan, almost 10 percent of all jobs on Dave’s site. For comparison, a company called ILA Vietnam posted the second largest number of recruiting ads, 30 – less than one third of Westgate’s total.

Westgate is an ESL jobber. They contract with public elementary, junior, senior high schools and universities to provide English teachers. Westgate purchased the Sony Vector Interactive Communication (SVIC) software system and uses it in its online program. The profile of students in the program includes the usual conversation school suspects – housewives, university students and businessmen.

The Sony Vector software uses online video to provide examples of a number of English interactions – usually in a business context. Examples

of lessons include: introductions, greetings, giving instructions, comparing two products, etc. After watching the video and practicing the dialogues, students complete a number of online grammar and vocabulary drills and then use these new items for online pattern substitution drills. In addition to oral/aural practice, the software also includes writing drill practice: writing letters, making reports, planning an itinerary, etc.

Each week after completing the online activities, students “meet” online with their tutor for an interview or submit a writing assignment. The teacher then assesses the students’ mastery of the week’s language point. This assessment is quite detailed. Each week students receive an e-mail outlining the points that were evaluated that week and then, with examples, from the students’ interview or writing sample, explanation of the student’s success or where students need work. Westgate pays teachers YEN1000 for 30 minutes work in the online program. According to Westgate, in the 30 minutes, teachers are expected to conduct a ten-minute interview and then spend 20 minutes compiling a report. No planning of lessons is considered necessary.

4. Reaction to the Middle Way

There are three principal shareholders in this mixed media scenario: the teachers, the students and administration. For students there are obvious benefits. The mix of online and live teacher offers focused practice opportunities and feedback from a personal teacher. For teachers the opportunities also carry some risks, primarily the economic risk. A typical university teacher will have around 200 students a semester with adjunct faculty having maybe double that. It is impossible for teachers in a classroom setting to provide the personal feedback that students are getting from these mixed media providers. The second threat is to the role of the teacher. Traditionally teaching has been a principal based profession (Levitt et al., 2005). This is especially true for university teachers. Generally workers in principal based professions agree on a set

of goals and methods, but the details of meeting those goals are left to the individual workers. In these mixed media practices, teachers' roles are very limited, proscribed. This reduction in status and reimbursement are the principal threat to teachers. For administrations, the mixed media method offers a degree of accountability superior to current university methods, but means turning over a portion of the curriculum to a third party.

5. Conclusion

These new mixed media methods of combining online activities with live teachers offer new learning opportunities for students. Students would probably benefit from the focused and results driven lesson plans that these companies offer as well as the greater opportunities for feedback. Teachers and administrators should feel threatened by the reduction in status and compensation that these companies threaten.

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