Reflections on the Practice of the Graduate English Internet Courseware

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After more than two years’ investigations and researches on its feasibility, the Internet English teaching courseware was put into use in the fall semester in 2000. In the past five years, the practice, which consolidated student-centered learning of reading and listening via the Internet with small-sized oral and writing classes organized by teachers, verified the benefits of this modern technique and cast a reflection in the meantime.

Common assumptions

It is commonly believed that the new media, or the Internet, integrity with good planning and teaching method helps both teachers and students. It helps realize a student-centered learning process by emphasizing individualized study, specified teaching materials, and the flexible time and place of learning. In such a student-centered learning process the use of the Internet facilitates information input and links the knowledge with the use. If in the traditional classroom, the learning process can be represented in the following linear mode,

![Diagram of traditional classroom](attachment://traditional_classroom_diagram.png)

then with the new media, the process can be represented in a more complicated radiating mode.

![Diagram of radiating model](attachment://radiating_model_diagram.png)
In the second mode, the new media opens new responsibilities to the students for the organizing and conducting of their learning process as well as their effectiveness and their results. Students can determine what to learn, how long it takes to learn, and with whom to communicate. The new media enables them an alternative to the classroom participation. However, the teacher’s role has been changed into a facilitator of learning, a material developer, and a learning supervisor. The teacher can pre-select the textbook material, make the Internet courseware and embed it into the whole learning environment, and join the communication group to which the student might talk.

Investigation and implementation of improvements

With the above assumptions, we conducted an investigation among the first year graduate students. The statistics indicate that the graduates vary greatly in their English proficiencies. The classroom practice alone could hardly achieve their individual goals. The teacher’s speed of leading the class was either too fast to some slow learners or too slow to some others. It was hard for the teachers to organize a satisfactory class, either. Thus a self-adjusted learning pace seems a rational answer to the problem.

To achieve this goal, a self-access Internet courseware with pre-selected language learning materials was created and put into action. The courseware includes 11 pre-selected reading units, corresponding reading guide and exercises, background information, listening exercises and some pictures relative to the contents.

In the practice, the courseware, in some degree, increased the students’ knowledge input and the students were enabled to finish the required reading and listening syllabus on their own with the help of the courseware. Their study of English became more individualized with self-adjusted pace. In another word, the courseware made the learning process more flexible. It’s the students’ decision on how much time to spend on the learning, how many times a listening section can be repeated, and to how much detail their understanding of the materials can be refined.

Further more, with the reading and listening hours shifted to the Internet, small-sized oral and
writing classes became available. Such smaller oral and writing classes facilitated the practice of the knowledge inputted from students’ reading and listening activities. It can be said that the new media benefits the whole learning process through individualized learning plan.

**Under-usage of the courseware**

In spite of all the above-mentioned benefits that the courseware has brought about, it was not so popular as expected. Not all the students would choose to read on the Internet. The phenomenon led to another round of investigations and reflections. What could be the reasons for such under-usage? Complaints from students mainly reflect three possible reasons.

1. **Time-consuming**
   It seems paradoxical that the expected time-saving software is complained to be time-consuming. The reasons mainly lie in the over-loaded information caused by the new media and the software users’ unfamiliarity with it. For one thing, the courseware embedded the refined works of a group of teachers. It offers much more information than a teacher could offer in a single class. It’s a virtual influx of information onto the readers. For another, the links to the Internet created easier access to more information. Once teachers failed to give enough guidance in time, students might spend too much time on refining a snow-flake from a spring avalanche. For even another thing, some students, as well as teachers, are not good at computer operating at all. It somewhat depends on their willingness to learn the new technique and the new media. Such unfamiliarity with the machine and the unwillingness to take the challenge could turn into an obstacle to the spreading of the new media.

2. **Plagiarism**
   This complaint doubtlessly comes from teachers. Some teachers are reluctant to make use of the new media in their teaching because they think it makes pirating so easy that they could hardly stop students from copying other people’s work from the Internet. If students keep doing so for their homework, it would be a waste of time for both teachers and students and the supposed improved learning process would become a shortcut for plagiarism.

3. **Inaccessibility**
   Adult students who worked in the daytime and studied at nights at home account for a considerable percentage of graduates. The result of a technology issue caused the unpopularity of the courseware among them. Since the courseware is only accessible via the college intranet, many of them living outside the campus could not access to it via the World Wide Web. The restriction for the sake of network security worked as a firewall preventing visits from any IP address other than those on the intranet. The restrictions of machines work in another case. Some students, although not many, complained the equipment required by the new media unaffordable. Even up to now, hardly could we assure that each student owns a computer.

**Reflections on the years’ practice**

As is well-known that finding out problems is an important step in the “practice---cognition” action research cycle. They urge people to think twice and reflect on the practice. Based on the
investigations, observations, and analysis mentioned above, some reflections are also made on the courseware designing and spreading.

1. Financial considerations
   Software industry, different from any other industries, develops quickly. It’s a long-term field modification. Constant investment is needed in order to keep the product---as well as the required equipment---up-to-date, once any of such projects has started. If the product can not gain its deserved popularity, the balance between investment and profits might be the material problem faced by the software developers. Not to mention that the investment should include the human resources as well.

2. Academic concerns
   Plagiarism is a tumor in the cyber world. It’s all too simple to make a copy of a document on the computer. Yet the students should be taught that plagiarism is hazardous to the academic world. They should be aware of what they are learning and what they are creating. The simple copying committed by the machines could do nothing but harm to their academic life. Teachers’ supervision and guidance are especially important in this respect.

3. Communication concerns
   The language learning courseware, in order to fulfill its interactive functions, usually sets up a bulletin board for students to communicate with the teacher and with each other. Not doubt it’s a wonderful platform for both synchronous and asynchronous Internet communications. But due to the nature of language---let alone the infamous BBS shorthanded language, such as ft for faint, bf for boyfriend, and gf for girlfriend---this keyboard communication can only be taken as an auxiliary method to the ordinary oral class. The natural communication between teachers and students does not only convey the verbal message, but also the non-verbal ones such as expressions, gestures, and manners. It’s far more complicated than the keyboard punching can express. Thus, we still think an integrity of the traditional classes and the modern technique is a good way-out of improving the learning process.

The above cognition is just a spot on a leopard. Hope that the growing team of language learning courseware developers can see what we haven’t seen and create more ever-updating products.

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