Let's talk - providing virtual ESL learning support from a distance

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This paper describes the results of a pilot undertaken to find how suitable the Wimba virtual classroom option is in providing academic learning support from a central Learning Support Centre for English as Second Language (ESL) students not based on the main campus of the institution. With the increasing number of remote campuses being established there is a need to provide equitable learning support to remote students. While learners had positive perceptions of the virtual classroom's interactions as language learning tools, the pilot study highlighted some complications to the transition to virtual support. A number of lessons were learned and will be shared.

Keywords: virtual classroom, ESL learning support, equity of provision, remote campuses

Introduction

Virtual classrooms and web conferencing have been successfully integrated into higher education for teaching purposes and their effectiveness has been established through sustained research investigations. The suite of tools that these synchronous classrooms provide, according to the literature, allow instructors the interactive elements that today's learners need to succeed in both blended and pure distance learning environments (Kudyma, Aoki, & Liu n.d; Sweeney, 2009; Frutos-Perez, 2009). The virtual classroom "employs a combination of synchronous and asynchronous technologies such as audio, video and other data sharing and interaction tools (e.g., an interactive whiteboard, document sharing, desktop sharing and multimedia discussion forums) to provide an integrated learning environment where multimodal interaction with both human and materials can be facilitated" (Chen & Wang, 2008, p97).

The flexibility in time, convenience of place, (Wu & Hiltz, 2004; Henry & Li, 2005) accessibility and equal opportunity to all learners are the major advantages cited by many researchers who support the use of virtual learning environments (Everett & Ahern, 1994; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999; Ortega, 1997; Warschauer & Kem, 2000). Their use creates opportunities for those who would otherwise not be able to take part in learning.

However, it appears the virtual classrooms are not well used, especially if a traditional didactic approach is adopted, (Andrews et al 2008), or if the students are confused by the multiple avenues available for interaction (McBrien, Jones & Rui, 2009) or if the controls of the classroom are not given to the students to make use of as well (Ng, 2007). It has been suggested that instructors need training in how to use these classrooms effectively (Barrett, 2010) to transition from face to face to virtual interactions, and clear guidelines on how to structure the sessions appropriately (Pelliccione & Broadley, 2010). If as the literature suggests, teachers are cognisant of the need to adapt their practice and adopt strategies as fundamental as recognising the importance of socialisation and informal exchanges (Finkelstein, 2006), turntaking (Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009) and reducing the transactional distance (or cognitive space between learners and instructors), (Moore 1993) the classrooms are a powerful tool in the teaching and learning process for the programme of study, **and** the provision of academic learning support, particularly to ESL students.

Although the advent of a virtual classroom environment is relatively new, the impact of using such tools in language teaching itself has already been proven (Ward, 2005; Lafford & Lafford 2005). Additionally, learning a language can be an anxious process for many due to second language learners' inhibitions (McIntyre et al., 2003). However, a virtual learning environment has proved to be conducive to language learning as it appears to reduce student self-awareness and social anxiety, which results in increased language production, and the environment has the potential to address various difficulties facing distance language learners (Bradley & Lomicka, 2000; Wallace, 1999; Carnevale, 2003; Roed, 2003).

This paper describes a pilot which was carried out to determine whether the attributes of the virtual classroom were a viable option to meet the **ESL learning support needs** of the diverse student body located at remote campuses, away from the centralized, in-person provision of the institute, and therefore provide a more equitable service to students.

Context

The institute has multiple remote campuses in various areas in addition to the main campus. The Learning Support Centre is situated on the main campus with subject specialists who provide extra academic support to the students. The role of the specialist ESL Learning Advisors at the institution is to give language support to mainly ESL students. These students who need extra academic/language support can access the service in person at the main campus outside their class time, individually or with a group. Lecturers can also refer students to the Learning Advisors when they themselves identify students in need of additional support. Learning Support Centre records clearly show, however, that **remote** campus students rarely access the Centre's services. Reasons usually given by students are that getting transport to the main campus is a barrier, and the time involved is better spent in other ways. Likewise, travel time and scarce resources are the main factors that limit the Learning Advisors themselves from going to the remote campuses more frequently. Facilitating the learning of students via a virtual classroom then was seen as a possible solution to this problem.

Process

A pre-survey established that the students and staff were ready to try the virtual support concept, therefore an appropriate time was negotiated with the lecturers at the remote sites to deliver trial sessions. Topic sentence and paragraph writing skills emerged as a common need amongst the participants. Carefully structured lessons were devised to suit the virtual environment (Pelliccione & Broadley 2010). PowerPoint slides and quizzes were uploaded to the Wimba classroom. Technical issues needed to be dealt with and the Advisor had to master the virtual classroom environment and was given support from the Learning Technology Centre staff to make the transition to virtual Advisor. (Barrett 2010). Care was taken to address each aspect that would reduce the three aspects of "transactional distance" as identified by Moore (1993). Each session utilised the two way audio, one way video and text chat functionality (to **encourage dialogue** about the topic being covered), presentation materials and carefully spaced online quizzes with immediate feedback (**lesson structure**). Sessions were archived so that students could revisit the lesson later (assisting **learner autonomy**) (Moore, ibid). Informal exchanges were encouraged before and during the sessions (Finkelstein 2006). The trial support sessions were

arranged at times to suit the class lecturers and most of them attended with their students. Learning Technology Centre staff were on hand to deal with any technical issues both at the main campus and at the remote sites.

A total of 65 students took part in the pilot from various language backgrounds and age range. Each class received only one session. Although the theme of the steps of the writing process was the same for each group, sessions were modified according to the student's levels (upper intermediate to advanced).

Results and Discussion

Analysis of Student Short poll

At the end of each of the Wimba sessions students were asked to complete a short poll while still in the classroom environment to gauge the success of the experience. Questions covered both the content and the process as shown below.

Table 1: Student Poll Results

Question N=65	No, not at all	No, not really	Yes, a bit	Yes, completely
The lesson was interesting	2%	9%	32%	57%
The lesson helped me understand the topic	2%	2%	52%	46%
I am comfortable using the Wimba classroom	2%	9%	38%	52%
I would like to see more ESL Lessons through Wimba	6%	5%	31%	58%

Unfortunately, given the time constraints, the experience could not be repeated for the students, so the outcomes are based on a single instance in each case. Overall, the poll results show that the majority of the students were positive about their learning experience and would like to see more lessons through the virtual classroom. The range of reactions may well have been influenced by the technical difficulties experienced, the newness of the approach and the diversity of the student group.

Analysis of Lecturer feedback

After the sessions the class lecturers were approached for their overall feedback. All perceived that the introduction of learning support such as this via the Wimba classroom was a positive step and useful to students. They all agreed that participation once in the environment was simple, but some help was needed at the beginning to take students through the access process because although students are fine with general computer use, they need a few pointers for navigating to the site, logging in and finding the classroom itself. There were issues with student microphones; some worked and some didn't. Many students had to rely on the text chat function to communicate during the session which was frustrating. However, overall class lecturer satisfaction with the lesson outweighed the dissatisfaction due to technical difficulties/shortcomings they witnessed.

Learning Advisor's reflections

The provision of support via a virtual classroom offers great promise but also poses significant challenges to both staff and the students. For the Learning Advisors too, the process of delivering a range of virtual classroom sessions requires considerable planning, preparation, forethought and skill, which initially required significant allocations of time. Materials once created can be reused though.

The importance of lecturer buy-in

Lecturer enthusiasm appears to be necessary to overcome student passivity or lack of motivation to embrace this unfamiliar means of getting learning support for students, and it was a challenge getting cooperation from

lecturing staff at the remote sites. Lecturers are aware of the need for equity of support but do not routinely promote the Learning Support Centre with or for their students. The virtual classroom option could therefore be a more easily accessible support mechanism which could be promoted more rigorously.

Technical issues

Hardware in the remote computer labs was an issue, even though the set up should be the same as that at the main campus. Frequently audio could not be used on the machines as although headsets with microphones were supplied, the microphone did not work plugged into either the front or the back connection. This did not provide a welcoming environment and although computer savvy students were not thrown, those less familiar with technology were somewhat put off by the delay and non-performance. Additionally there is currently no soundproof area at the base venue (in the Learning Support Centre itself) from which to conduct these virtual classroom sessions. It is hoped that if the trial is extended a more suitable area can be found.

Conclusions and recommendations

The pilot has proved the concept of providing equitable learning support to remote campuses via a virtual classroom. There are great opportunities here that allow flexibility, and with the right conditions, the Learning Support Centre staff can offer assistance on a range of subjects to students no matter where they are.

The following recommendations have been made therefore to ensure the success of such a service and to eliminate the issues identified. **S**upporting remote campuses in this way can be achieved if:

- There are high levels of coordination and collaboration by all parties: IT infrastructure services, the staff development unit, Learning Support Centre staff, faculty administrators and lecturing staff
- Technical access to the online classroom is prioritised
- Teaching staff are encouraged to promote the service through high level sponsorship which stresses the strategic importance of the initiative to utilise virtual the support service
- An on-site, face to face orientation for the lecturers demonstrates the possibilities of remote support and the operation of the virtual classroom

A more flexible approach to programme delivery is a strategic direction for the institute. Alongside that is the challenge of providing an equal level of learning support to students at remote campuses to ensure their retention and success. This pilot, though brief in order to prove the concept, uncovered a number of logistical challenges that will need to be addressed, but given the cost savings in both travel and time will be worth persevering with. Following the success of the pilot, it is hoped that the virtual classroom service can be expanded to be a routine part of the Learning Support Centre provision for students at remote campuses of the institute. With the strategic direction of the institute in mind, to take learning to where the students are, the lessons learned here can be utilised to enhance equity in provision for a range of services of support normally accessed only on the main campus.

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