

## **E-learning English: bringing the baton to the doorstep**

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### **Abstract**

*A new learning space was created for 40 Malay residents from a disadvantaged community. For three months the residents attended English language lessons in a 40-foot air-conditioned container in their community's playground. Blended, place-based delivery enabled the learners with varying English competencies, from a range of ages and ethnicities, to attend the lessons.*

*The programme evolved from the cooperation of organisations and government agencies in Malaysia and New Zealand. The communicative face-to-face and task-based online lesson content was developed and administered in New Zealand and delivered by teachers under direction in Malaysia. The Special Innovation Unit (UNIK), an agency of the Malaysian government, identified the recipient community for the pilot programme. Then, through a consultative process of 'walking, working and winning' with the community and its leaders, while also combining resources and expertise with practicality, resourcefulness and creativity, a successful model for delivering an English language programme evolved.*

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on how a new English language learning space was created for 40 Malay residents from a disadvantaged community. It consists of several parts: background information on how the programme was developed, an overview of its delivery in Malaysia, and, finally, some observations and reported outcomes. The intention is to demonstrate how, through consultation with the community and community leaders, along with the interconnectivity of a group of educationally-focussed organisations and government agencies, a cost-effective, optimal learning opportunity can be established.

### **Background information**

The author of this paper is associated with LearningWorks, WINTEC, an educational institution based in New Zealand which develops teaching and learning solutions for online and classroom delivery. The team of content writers works with a range of global organisations to improve learners' English competency, through the integration of online and face-to-face delivery of vocational and staff training, classroom learning, and community literacy and language programmes. This paper outlines and reports on the processes and outcomes of delivering a 'blended face-to-face and web-based General English' course to a disadvantaged community in Malaysia. The delivery took place in the community's own environment, and incorporated elements of both blended and place-based instructional methods. The rationale of the Malaysian government agency for initiating the course was to improve the life and living spaces of low-income families in the community. Using a framework of reference for a dynamic research approach of 'walk, work and win' to work along with urban poor, the Malaysian government agency, UNIK, identified the need for the English programme and laid the foundations for realising its delivery.

### **Programme development and theoretical framework**

#### **Blended delivery**

Blended delivery and the networking of computer systems, educators, trainers and learners provide greater opportunities for learners, teachers, institutions, corporates and communities alike. The use of technology has enriched English language learning opportunities for learners, and provided interesting variations on traditionally-accepted educational perspectives. Content can be delivered face-to-face, online or in blended form to individuals or to a group community. LearningWorks, WINTEC, by providing offshore training sessions to tutors, is delivering worldwide, place-based learning opportunities.

#### **Place-based education**

'Place-based education' and 'place-conscious education' is linked to the work of Gruenewald and Smith (2008) who argue that by drawing on local experiences as a source of student learning, education that is conscious of local places enables learners to be inducted into the 'knowledge and patterns of behaviour associated with responsible community engagement' (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008, p. xvi).

However, setting up a partnership between an educational advisor, an educational institution and a government agency can be time-consuming. Initiating a tripartite relationship such as that developed between New Zealand and Malaysia required investing time and effort.

#### **A network creation process**

The connectivist view (Siemens, 2005) that learning is a network creation process significantly impacts how we design and develop learning within educational institutions, corporations and communities. With the act of learning being seen as a function under the control of the learner,

designers and teachers need to provide the ideal environment to allow learning to occur. Yet, when designing a course for distance delivery, there is not only the learner to consider. There are also cultural, political, commercial and community constraints.

### **Course design**

In developing the course, the principles of sound language curriculum design were integrated into both the face-to-face and online content. Throughout the General English course, language is frequently recycled. The content development team followed the 10 principles for developing language courses recommended by Rod Ellis (2003):

1. Ensure learners develop a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and rule-based competence.
2. Focus predominantly on meaning.
3. Also focus on form.
4. Develop implicit knowledge without neglecting explicit knowledge.
5. Take into account the learners' 'built-in-syllabus'.
6. Require extensive L2 input.
7. Also require opportunities for output.
8. Interact in L2 as a means of developing proficiency.
9. Take into account individual learning styles.
10. Assess free, as well as controlled production.

The course is also based on the six principles for intercultural communicative language teaching identified by the New Zealand Ministry of Education report (2012). Namely, the course:

1. Integrates language and culture from the beginning.
2. Engages learners in genuine interaction.
3. Encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language.
4. Fosters explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures.
5. Acknowledges and responds appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts.
6. Emphasises intercultural communicative competence rather than native-speaker competence.

The course extends the learning experience in ways which challenge and motivate learners and contribute to the development of their communicative language proficiency skills. The face-to-face content draws on a range of teaching and learning methodologies, including topic-based, situational-based, function-based, and skills-based learning. This variation is in keeping with research, which suggests that alternating attention between form and meaning optimises the learner's opportunity for learning (Ellis, 2001).

The online course follows the works of Ellis (2003) with a task-based approach. It also takes a balanced approach to form and meaning. Following the generally established practice of learner knowledge being built up by the learner, previous learner knowledge is elicited, the vocabulary and topic are introduced, learners listen to the relevant language structure prior to reading it, and the written form of the structure is introduced and then produced (Harmer, 2007).

Language form and meaning are controlled, as is the use of the language. Language use is relevant to the specific situation or context in which it is being presented (Richards & Renandya, 2002). The learning is contextualised. The face-to-face component allows for contexts to be drawn directly from the learner's own environment.

### **Theoretically-driven blended delivery: face-to-face content**

Learners require copious opportunities to manipulate structures and construct meaning to become confident language users. By providing a face-to-face element, learners are provided with an opportunity to collaborate and reflect collectively on individual learner responses (Chai and Tan, 2009). According to Murphy (1997), ‘learning situations, environments, skills, content and tasks are relevant, realistic, authentic and represent the natural complexities of the “real world” ’(as cited in McKenzie, Morgan, Cochrane, Watson & Roberts, 2002, p. 427).

### **Theoretically-driven blended delivery: online content**

The online content of this course also significantly aligns with real life. The authentic contexts and types of tasks presented to the learners throughout the online task-based course reflect the way knowledge is used in real life situations. Throughout the course, the activities are not a one-way or two-way information gap, where learners have to provide a description of an image or spot-the-difference. Rather, the tasks require thinking and reasoning. ‘Students learn from thinking. Thinking about what they are doing or what they have just done, thinking about what they believe and thinking about the thinking process. Thinking and reasoning’ (Jonassen, Howland, Marra and Crismond, 2008, p. 3). The activities reflect the kind of language use and interactional communication an individual requires when actually engaged in a real-life task or situation.

### **Interactional online learning**

Throughout the entire course, the activities have a relational thread from one exercise to the next. The activities are engaging and entertaining, but more importantly they are educational and emulate the real world.

### **Online feedback**

The learner is provided with instant, system-based feedback for each response. Functionality enables the productive skills of written and spoken discourse to be captured. If required, written text can be saved for peer review or to be marked by a tutor. Alternatively, the learner can self-assess against a model answer. The system for speaking captures the learner’s voice and enables the learner to compare their version to a model answer. The feedback raises learner awareness and enhances learner performance by encouraging critical thinking around answers. Learners can identify where they are experiencing difficulties through constructive feedback, and this can be done in the privacy of their own learning environment.

### **Constructive alignment**

Construction of the blended General English course was a team effort. The content writers and teachers endeavoured to create a learning environment which was as encouraging and as supportive as possible for learners. By working closely with the government administrators, the Malaysian and New Zealand educational advisors were able to construct a course which incorporated the learners’ daily life experiences into the programme. Constructivist theory believes that effective learning environments embed learning in social experience (Cunningham, Duffy and Knuth, 1993).

## **Methodology and programme delivery**

### **Programme setup**

This course evolved from a new learning space created for a group of adult Malaysian learners from a multi-ethnic, low-income community. The residents live in low-cost, high rise apartment blocks and have been categorised by government agencies as being ‘amongst the

poorest of the poor'. This disadvantaged community has a high crime rate. In the pre-programme discussions the community expressed a real desire to change this state of affairs. A research team conducted an independent study of the community's issues, challenges, needs and aspirations. According to J. Adaickalam (personal communication November 5, 2012) the process of community development, from its 'inception until the stage of measuring the outputs as well as gauging the outcomes, can only be noble and inherently successful' when it is ensured that the 'people *win* in a grand-way', and such an outcome requires that all the stakeholders including the private sector, government agencies, and any other related parties have '*walked* the talk and *worked* in a symbiotic manner within the system.' If this is the case, then they too will also 'eventually *win* in a significant way'. From the surveys conducted with the community it was established that the number two and three desire on each individual's list was to learn English. However, aside from scientific data it was also important to engage in a series of dialogues and conversations with all the stakeholders, including with the relevant personnel in the partnering organisations in Malaysia and New Zealand. It was also important to manage the costs and resources. However, while satisfying the budget requirements, there was to be no compromising on the quality of the deliverables. Quality was to be maintained at the highest possible standards. The development of the programme required the collaboration of the staff from the Malaysian government agency (UNIK), the educational advisor, based in Malaysia, and myself, an academic advisor and content writer, based in LearningWorks, WINTEC, in New Zealand. Each member of the team was required to provide leadership, input and support at various times throughout the planning and delivery stages. Throughout the development phase, emails flowed to and fro on a weekly, and sometimes daily, basis. There were face-to-face, consultative meetings with community leaders and Skype calls between the government agency personnel and ESOL specialists in both countries. The container classroom was transported in and located in the playground. Two air-conditioning units were installed along with the cabling to accommodate 20 computers. All 20 second-hand computers were donated by a New Zealand-based company.

### **The learner group**

The finalised group consisted of 30 individuals, mostly middle-aged women; a small number were employed but most were homemakers. There were just a few men, all of whom were in low paid employment or still in school. Everyone who was attending class had a similar desire to improve their personal and/or working circumstances. The course was provided to the learners at a nominal fee of 10 Ringgitt per face-to-face lesson because it was believed there would be more commitment to attend class regularly, if a fee was paid. Attendance and completion of the course was not, however, compulsory. There was a range of English competencies, from Beginner or False Beginner to Low Intermediate, and there was a range in age and ethnicity (Malay, Chinese and Indian). Contrary to our assumptions, many of the learners actually had a more than basic understanding of English. Many simply lacked the confidence and opportunity to use the language. To reiterate, this programme aimed at up-skilling the community to improve their lives, providing better opportunity for employment, and at the social and psychological benefits of educating a disadvantaged community.

### **Course components**

The learners attended one 3-hour, face-to-face lesson every second Saturday. The same lesson was delivered in the morning and again in the afternoon, so learners chose which session to attend. The communicative face-to-face lesson was supported with an associated task-based online lesson which the learners completed at a time convenient to them between the face-to-face lessons. The online self-study component, which consisted of approximately 12 hours of study a fortnight, was able to be completed on a personal home computer. However, because

none of the learners had a personal computer available to them, an arrangement with the community leaders enabled the container classroom to be unlocked at set times throughout the week when individuals could enter and complete their online lessons at their own pace. The learners could also access the classroom at any other time simply by collecting the key from the community leader. On these occasions the individual was accountable for the security of the classroom and the computers. Learners were supported throughout the course by teachers and administrators both in New Zealand and in Malaysia.

### **Training**

In order to introduce the Malaysian-based clients to the General English programme, and as LearningWork's representative, I provided a one-day training session in Malaysia for 8 people: the Malaysian educational advisor, three English tutors from her company, and four managers from the government agency, UNIK. The training day focused on both the online and face-to-face elements of the course, with interactive teaching techniques for classroom activities also being demonstrated during the sessions.

All students came together for the first class. It had been planned that all learners would log on and complete an online assessment during their first class. However, it was immediately apparent that the online test would have to be abandoned as many of the participants had never interacted with a computer before. So, completing the paper-based pre-testing, and logging into the course, proved too challenging for the first day. It was not until the second face-to-face class that all learners had the basic computer skills necessary to access the online content. Students were then able to log on and familiarise themselves with the navigation bar and the various interactions.

### **Contractual factors**

Students signed a contract which outlined their commitment to the programme and set down the rules around such aspects as copyright of the course content. By signing the contract, students gave their consent and acknowledged that their actions, including test results and classroom participation, could be recorded for research purposes. The content of the contract was also explained verbally in the students' first language.

## **Results**

### **Observed outcomes**

The observed outcomes of this course were immediately obvious. When the tutors began the initial training, there were very few learners able or confident to communicate in English. They were also extremely reluctant to use the computer, and most lacked basic computer skills. In fact, one teacher wrote to me: 'For many it was the first time seeing and sitting in front of a computer!' (personal communication, August 22, 2013). However, after the first couple of lessons the learners appeared to be much more willing and comfortable with using the language and interacting with the computers. Mid-way through the programme, I visited Malaysia to observe a lesson. I noted a willingness by the learners to communicate with me in English, despite me being a native-English speaker. Staff from the government agency UNIK, who attended each face-to-face session, also stated they had observed individuals demonstrating a greater confidence to use English as the lessons progressed.

### **Formal assessment**

The observed outcomes were strongly supported by the students' results in their formal assessment. The paper-based Oxford Placement Tests (OPT) 1 and 2 were used as the respective pre- and post-tests. Historically, through LearningWorks, I had gathered data from

a range of Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students who had sat the OPT. We had also gathered information from other groups of Malaysian learners, so that we would be able to make comparisons between groups. From our previous experiences in Malaysia, this group was by far the most nervous about being tested. The Malaysian teachers reported:

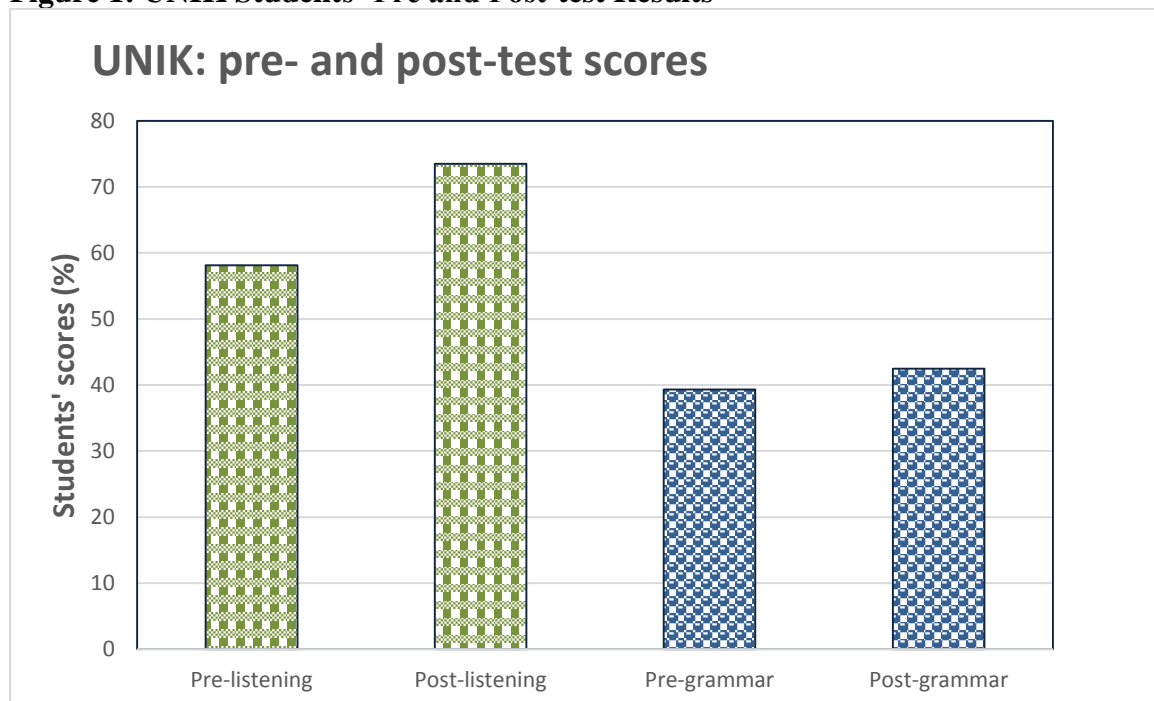
‘The students never expected to be tested.’

‘The students are women who never had more than primary education and they were intimidated.’

‘One participant left after the first 20 minutes and we had to actually talk her into sitting for the post-test.’

The specific pre- and post-test results are as seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: UNIK Students’ Pre and Post-test Results**



### **Programme success**

The overall outcomes of the programme demonstrated a measurable rise in English language competency for every learner. There was, however, one student who failed to demonstrate a measurable rise on the post-test, although teachers reported that this appeared to them to be an anomaly and was not reflective of what was happening for the learner in the classroom. Of the 30 students who completed the pre-test, 20 completed the post-test. A further 7 students completed the course but did not complete the post-test. As reported earlier, the majority of these learners were test-phobic, so it was not surprising that 7 failed to show. The remaining 3 students, who had sat the pre-test, did not complete the course due to work commitments or for family reasons, and therefore did not sit the post-test. The increases in mean scores for the post-tests, as compared to the pre-tests, were as follows: the grammar increased from 39.33 to 42.45% and the listening increased from 58.13 to 73.5%. For the specific pre- and post-test results see Figure 1. It would not have been surprising if, in fact, the learners had not demonstrated a measurable rise in grammar competency, as the learners’ production of the language forms required to complete the face-to-face lesson tasks is more incidental and not

necessarily directed at raising the learner's consciousness about the grammatical properties of the language. The focus was not directed at 'acquiring' the target features, only at 'learning' them (Fotos & Ellis, 1991, p.611).

### **Programme outcomes**

Improvements in language skills almost invariably result in greater self-confidence, but improvements in self-confidence may occur with little or no change in language skills. Learners reported gains in confidence, other than language competency, for example, their knowledge of, and ability to use a computer:

'I enjoy using computer on my own now.'

### **Delivery monitored**

Throughout the delivery of the face-to-face and online course, the activity and progress of the learners was closely monitored. Individuals experiencing difficulty were given remedial assistance by the Malaysian teachers with assistance from LearningWorks' academic advisor.

## **Reasons for a successful programme**

### **Interconnectivity of partners**

The success of this programme owes much to the high standards of service delivery of everyone involved, and in particular to the interconnectivity between the partners. Each team collaborated independently and collectively to provide direction, input and support at various stages throughout the programme.

### **Professional teachers**

In their post course feedback, the students recognised and valued the professionalism of the teachers delivering their programme:

'The teachers are very good, even though some of them are younger than us.'

'It's interesting how they interact and teach the older students.'

### **On-going feedback**

Throughout the course the students provided feedback on their lessons through an informal discussion at the end of each face-to-face lesson. This enabled the tutors and support team to get feedback and provide assistance where it was needed. At the end of the course, the students acknowledged it was not their test results that mattered to them, but rather their confidence in using English.

## **Discussion**

### **Effecting change**

Education is about change, and the most obvious changes occur in a learner's knowledge, skills and attitudes. However, there are often wider, less obvious impacts that occur as a result of education. These ripple effects occur in a learner's home life and the various communities in which they participate. One such ripple effect was that by implementing change in the lives of two mothers in this group, we were in fact impacting upon the lives of their collective 20 children. At the completion of the course, programme administrators also observed students demonstrating a raised level of self-confidence while attending to their daily life tasks within the community.

### **Blended Delivery**



Learners appreciated the delivery of the place-based course which allowed them to continue learning at their own pace and in their own place. With the container classroom being situated in the playground, mothers could attend class knowing their children were nearby. Children were also welcomed into the classroom when it was necessary. The students valued the opportunity to access computers in their own backyard, and the skilled, highly qualified English tutors. They also appreciated the compassion of the teachers' delivery.

'I can study in the classroom any time'.

'When I did not understand something I asked my teacher'.

### **Why was this programme successful?**

Was it because the students had a deep desire to learn English? Was it because many of them had learnt English years before, so there was a foundation to build on? Was it because the students were motivated to better their lives and living situations? Or was it because the team surrounding the learners was totally dedicated to their specific roles? The author of this paper suggests that it was not any one of these factors that was any more important than any other. In fact, it was more in line with Aristotle's tenet, 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. It was the connectedness of the 'parts' that turbo-boosted the 'whole'.

### **Importance of connectedness**

The results of this study would seem to suggest that a raised level of connectedness of a learner's support systems determines more measurable gains.

## **Considerations**

### **Meeting learner and client needs**

Time deficiency is an issue for most teachers and learners. Learning hours for many students are being consumed by the demands of life, so teachers and learners have to optimise their teaching and learning time. In the business world, there are further demands. Planning and developing training opportunities across multiple organisations requires long lead-in times. Organisations, teachers and educators must provide learning opportunities, such as place-based learning, that are specifically designed to meet their clients' and learners' needs.

### **Establishing and finalising the learner group**

One of the major difficulties for this project was identifying the learner group. Funding was allocated for 40 individuals, however, with each community meeting prior to the commencement date, the list of participants' names changed. On the first day of class more than 30 people attended. During the course of the orientation process some individuals left. For session two, there was yet another variation on the group of learners who registered for the class. Given that the project was government-funded, there had to be measurable outcomes and pre- and post-testing provided such a measure.

## **Recommendations**

### **Informal meet and greet**

For future projects, the recommendation would be to have an initial, less formal meet and greet session during which the prospective learners would mix and mingle with the teachers and project administrators. There would be no official paperwork completed and no pre-testing. If the learners were feeling more relaxed about the programme, there may have been fewer changes in those initial sessions. As mentioned earlier, many of the group were test-phobic and many had not experienced a secondary education. These learners needed more time to warm to

the classroom environment. Also, more learners may have fronted for the post-test, if they had been made aware of the significance of obtaining measurable outcomes.

### **Factors influencing motivation**

Online learning can employ high levels of teaching expertise but it must be combined with identifying the students' learning needs. The learner must recognise the value of the learning and it must be enjoyable. According to Keller (1987), the factors most influencing motivation are attention, relevance of information, a sense of competence and satisfaction (ARCS). In this programme, the course administrators identified individual learner needs through the interpretation of learner errors in the pre-test. The tutors then met those needs in the face-to-face delivery and directed the learners to specific activities in the online course.

### **Individual learning plans**

Learner motivation can be greatly enhanced through the use of individual learning plans which clearly identify the goal and provide learning guidance. The Learning Skills and Improvement Services (2009), has an example of one of these. This programme would benefit from the introduction of personalised learner plans which would enrich the learning experience even more.

## **Conclusions**

### **Content, communication and construction in course design**

Content, communication and construction are the most essential elements to consider when developing a blended programme (Kerres & De Witt, 2003). The delivery of this course evolved through meticulous planning. The New Zealand and Malaysian-based academic administrators followed best practice throughout the development stages, and the learner remained central to the design (Shivetts, 2011). By encompassing the learner with highly professional, experienced individuals in the roles of government-agency representative identifying the needs of the community, classroom tutor, content writer, online technical support, or online delivery tutor, each learner was valued and supported. Through the interconnectedness of the team and by following the axiom of 'walk, work, win', everyone in their respective roles was also supported.

### **A network creation process**

As stated earlier, according to the connectivist view (Siemens, 2005), learning is a network creation process which impacts how we design and develop learning. With the act of learning being seen as a function under the control of the learner, designers and teachers need to provide the ideal environment to allow learning to occur. However, the challenges are magnified as we design and develop learning to meet the needs of place-based training, where the learners, teachers, academics, corporate administrators, and others are required to cross cultural, political and geographical boundaries. The success of this project owes much to the expertise of the key personnel involved and their commitment to best practice. Most importantly, passion, and a commitment to open and frequent dialogue between the participating teams, augmented the success.

### **Final thought**

As there is a move from formal, rigid learning to more informal, place- and connection-based, network-creating learning, it is critically important for learners that the networks encompassing them maintain the highest possible levels of interconnectedness. As educators we must continue to share knowledge in order to enable every individual to be the best they can possibly

be. As Nelson Mandela once said, 'Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world'.

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