Effective Technology–Mediated Education for Adult Chinese Learners

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INTRODUCTION

This article will address several areas relating to online learning and technology. We will report on work done in the development of four models that have been used to deliver effective professional development for adult learners. The courses are run in Taiwan from a base at Feng Chia University in Taichung, and all the attendees are Chinese. The key content is developed by instructors who are all native speakers of English from a range of countries. Some of this key content is delivered face-to-face and some is delivered virtually. Course facilitators are experienced in online learning and are Chinese. Our models thus utilize both internationally known teachers and local expertise. In addressing the training and education development needs of adult learners in a Chinese context, we needed to consider and accommodate three types of challenges:

- the constraints and demands on busy adult learners;
- the challenges of second language learning; and
- the use of technology-mediated distance education.

Each of these areas is challenging and complex in its own right. Many of the contributions in this encyclopedia will address one or more of these areas in some depth. This article should be considered as complementary to those focused contributions. Our globalized world is complex and multifaceted, and this article attempts to show how the application of knowledge and experience in several areas can be combined.

BACKGROUND

Adult Second Language Learners

There is a vast literature on adult education. Recurring themes in this literature are that adult learners are often more motivated than younger learners and come to a specific educational program with relatively clear goals in mind. They can also often relate course material to their own work settings and thus internalize and adapt knowledge in a way that can be immediately useful in the workplace. However, there are several problems that adult learners face. These include the need to juggle time constraints so that the demands of the educational program can be fitted into busy professional lives and family commitments. Adult learners, even those in senior positions, may no longer be accustomed to the discipline of structured educational offerings; many comment that it has been a long time since they were on the "education conveyor belt." Finally, when technology is involved, many adult learners have lower levels of confidence in becoming accustomed to and using online forums and Internet searching. All these factors are well documented, for example, in Jarvis (1995) and Galbraith, Sisco, and Guglielmino (1997).

The adult learner who is working in a second language faces additional challenges. Spack and Zamel (1998) argue that the conventions, concepts, and terms that a teacher uses in any classroom

creates a unique subculture, and successful learners are those who learn to read and interpret this culture. If the language nuances are not understood, it is very difficult for learners to work effectively. The level of English in Taiwan is not high (Yiu, 2003), and so this challenge needed special attention in the design of courses. Contributors to Duke (1987) echo this need and provide some local examples of successful practice in China. These examples all highlight the need for building flexibility into the design of educational programs so that the needs of individual learners can be met; in the language of constructivism, so that there is adequate scaffolding for all learners. These learning needs include both linguistic and cultural factors that are often difficult to define a priori; hence, the need for ongoing facilitation and negotiation. Chang's (2004) study of different strategies adopted by adult education trainers in the United States and in Taiwan clearly demonstrates the primacy of the factor of cultural negotiation.

Ensuring that Technology Facilitates Learning

It is quite curious that early Web-based teaching appeared to be regressive in that the drive to put materials "on the Web" led to a didactic environment. However, we seem to be moving out of this phase now and the communicative power of the Web has come to the fore. There are excellent guides available now about how to support eLearners in communicating online and developing meaningful online communities. The five-stage model of Salmon (2004) is useful in this regard. She discusses the importance of first ensuring good connectivity and motivation, then setting up online socialization, before there is any real academic information exchange or knowledge construction that might lead to more permanent ongoing development.

Table 1. Models for technology-mediated education for adult Chinese learners

Model	Development of key content	Facilitation of learning	Use of technology
1	Developed by international instructors in English. These instructors act as resource experts at a distance.	Two tiers of local facilitators, one group working in Chinese and one group working bilingually. Complex questions are fed back to the international instructor as needed.	100% online. These are called eWorkshops. See Figure 1.
2	Developed by international instructors in English who come to Taiwan for face-to-face (F2F) classes	Less reliance on the formal tiered system as there has been bilingual facilitation in the F2F classes. The role of the local facilitators is to bridge the gap between international theory and practice and local institutional environments.	F2F supplemented with the use of a learning management system (LMS). See Figure 2.
3	Developed mostly by international teachers in English. Saved digitally for use by local instructors. Some guest speakers come to Taiwan.	The nature of the F2F classes change with the possibility of more Chinese explanations being available for difficult English material when the local instructors are teaching.	F2F supplemented with the use of a learning management system (LMS). More F2F than in model 2. See Figure 3.
4	The development of eLearning course materials into a repository that can be produced on demand. Here there is a key role for the Library in the management and coordination of the course materials production. Constant revision and updating is also an important component. This is an adaptation of the concept of just-in-time course development and delivery-on-demand in a variety of formats (print, CD, online).	The design of each course can be customized to the group of learners. The mix of virtual modules, local instructor-led F2F classes, and international guest speakers can vary as needed.	Materials incorporated into an LMS. Balance of F2F and LMS as appropriate. This model enables a flexible blended use of technology. See Figure 4.

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