Managing the Change From On-Site to Online: transforming ESL courses for teachers

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ABSTRACT In Canada, all regular K-12 teachers face the challenge of teaching both native and non-native English speaking students. Consequently, working with students who use English as a second language (ESL) has become everybody's business, irrespective of whether they are teaching language or mathematics, at elementary or secondary levels. As a result, it is essential for in-service teachers to gain knowledge and develop skills in working with ESL students. Teaching English as a second language (TESL) courses have been delivered traditionally at the Faculty of Education at Queen's University through on-site training and with opportunities for working with ESL students. These courses, however, are now delivered online to teachers in different locations across the province and even in other parts of the world. This paper addresses the challenges of converting the on-site courses to an online format.

Introduction
In recent years, the proliferation of online initiatives at educational institutions around the world has been substantial. Indeed, the value of technology in the teaching and learning process has received much support, particularly from colleges and universities whose regular programmes are supplemented by a webcourse template system called WebCT [1] and/or are based on what is commonly referred to as distance education (Summerville, 2000). Currently, distance education incorporates many alternative education opportunities such as web-based or web-enhanced instruction, which enables learning to be more accessible and interactive (Brewer et al., 2001; Kearsley, 2000; Moore & Thompson, 1997). Distance learning using WebCT, as an alternative means of programme delivery, can be characterised by the use of electronic media, a variety of course management functions, and two-way communication or seminar-like virtual discussion. Such a programme of instruction allows for chat rooms (for group work), instant reflection and assignment posting on the public bulletin board, threaded discussions, email supporting two-way asynchronous private communication between individual teachers using a private messaging system, and instant monitoring and assessment of student progress, among other applications (Kirby, 1999). In this sense,
everything is contained online. With regard to course design, there is usually a team of specialists involved in the preparation and delivery of course content, such as a WebCT coordinator, curriculum designers, proof readers and graphic illustrators (Keegan, 1988).

There are numerous advantages to using instructional technology in teacher education with regard to its cost effectiveness, online discussion tools, virtual field trips and constructivist-oriented practices to support learning (Howard & McGrath, 1995; McAlister & Curtis, 2001). In particular, research suggests that reticent students tend to participate more readily and more often than in the regular classroom setting, which is of particular benefit to second language speakers and learners (Bump, 1990; Carey & Crittenden, 2000). It has also been suggested that distance education courses should include multiple communication methods such as threaded online discussions, video conferencing (if available) and printed materials for optimal learning (McAlister & Curtis, 2001). Although not a typical example, the CaseNet programme which is designed especially for teachers that encourages their development, not only in technology skills but also in case analysis and educational problem solving (Kent & McNergney, 1999). In a study assessing the effectiveness of using CaseNet, results showed that pre-service teachers were able to identify problems, apply professional knowledge and anticipate consequences more proficiently than those not using the software (Bronack et al., 1999). In short, online instructional technology can both supplement existing educational approaches, and also foster the creation of new and innovative methods in teaching and learning, which is essential for teacher education.

One programme in particular that has currently been converting its on-site format to an online form using WebCT is the offering of additional qualification courses to in-service teachers at the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University. The challenges for course designers are to transform the traditional on-site face-to-face courses to an online format that will continue to maintain high instructional standards and integrity. This paper describes the process of designing the three-part online additional qualification courses for teaching English as a second language (CONED539 TESL Parts I, II and III). The specific challenges of choosing appropriate textbooks to fit the online format, maintaining continuity between the courses, determining whom our course participants would be, including a practicum component, developing course content, and designing appropriate assessment procedures will be addressed.

Background

The Faculty of Education at Queens’ University, Ontario, Canada has been offering additional qualification courses for in-service teachers in a variety of specialisation areas over a 5-week period during the summer and winter for a number of years. However, with the advent of WebCT internet technology, the faculty has decided to offer most of these courses online as an alternative to the on-site face-to-face instruction. The major reasons are related to cost effectiveness, accessibility (our university is located in a small city) and pedagogy. There is no doubt that there are
many advantages to this transition: it is cost-effective and flexible for both faculty and in-service teachers; it is capable of reaching a larger number of teachers throughout the province and in other parts of the world; and it is able to offer engaging activities that meet the needs of the individual teachers who are taking the courses for professional development purposes.

In Canada, all regular K-12 teachers [2] face the challenge of teaching in a multilingual, multicultural and multiliterate classroom with both native and non-native English speaking students, especially in large urban centres. As indicated by the Ontario curriculum in English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development (ESL and ELD):

> increasing linguistic and cultural diversity provides many opportunities for cultural enrichment and global education for all students. At the same time, because of the variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds that students have, schools need to provide language programs to ensure that all students develop the level of proficiency in English required for success at school, in postsecondary education and the workplace. (ESL/ELD: The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9–12 and ESL/ELD: The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8).

The TESL Part I, Part II and Part III courses, each consisting of 125 instruction hours, have been particularly popular at our Faculty of Education. They are designed to provide K-12 teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to meet the above Ministry of Education requirements for ESL students, whether these students are placed in specific ESL classes, ESL content classes or regular mainstream classes. However, taking courses that have been delivered traditionally through a very hands-on, face-to-face classroom format and transferring them to the virtual classroom has proved to be challenging both technologically and pedagogically for the course designers at the faculty. We will first examine the traditional face-to-face course for TESL Parts I, II and III and then discuss how the transition to the online format was achieved.

**The Traditional On-Site TESL Courses**

Additional qualification courses in TESL for Ontario-certified teachers consists of three parts. Teachers are given Honours, Pass or Incomplete upon completion of the courses.

**Part I** is designed to increase the awareness and understanding of teachers who are preparing to teach ESL classes and will need to accommodate ESL students in their regular classrooms. It is an introductory course in TESL that focuses on both the theory and practice of second/foreign language teaching, as well as cultural issues that can affect student performance and adaptation to the Canadian context. A practicum component is included because it gives teachers practical teaching experience with ESL students and the opportunity to reflect on that experience through classroom discussions and journal writing. Not everybody who takes the course has worked with ESL students before. Teachers attend classes that
involve lectures and group activities in the morning, while the afternoon is spent tutoring individual ESL students and/or observing ESL classes at the School of English at Queen’s University, private English language classes, elementary and high school ESL classes or adult continuing education classes through the Board of Education. Guest speakers are often invited to present pertinent issues in second language instruction based on their expertise. Assessment is based on the completion of short class assignments, such as designing lesson plans or adapting curriculum materials for ESL learners, a group cultural presentation that focuses on the linguistic needs and cultural differences of a particular nationality, and the submission of a detailed journal or teaching log of the tutoring sessions. The journal is the only assignment completed on an individual basis; the others are conducted in pairs or in small groups.

Part II is an expansion of Part I, in that the course content extends and reinforces the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous course. Teachers have more opportunity to share and apply their knowledge of language instruction, as most of them will have already had ESL teaching experience in Canada or experience in teaching English as a foreign language abroad when they come to Part II. More attention is given to analysing the implications of ESL curriculum guidelines, policies, procedures and regulations. Assessment usually involves presentations and written papers on key topics in second/foreign language teaching and learning. There is no practicum component for Part II and Part III; the focus is more on theoretical and curriculum issues related to language acquisition and culture learning.

Finally, Part III is referred to as a Specialist or Leadership Course intended for those teachers who wish to gain more knowledge about programme administration and planning in schools and at the Board of Education level. The focus here is on reviewing, designing, implementing and evaluating curriculum and providing leadership and examples of best practice to other teachers. Current trends in theory, research and policy are expanded upon and discussed in detail.

Although there are guidelines from the Ontario College of Teachers with regard to the curriculum design and implementation of these additional qualification courses, there is also much flexibility in arranging ESL tutorials and ESL classroom observations during the courses. It must also be remembered that these TESL courses are additional qualification courses; many teachers enter them with a wealth of knowledge and experience. Consequently, much time is allotted for sharing expertise and meeting the needs of the actual teaching context.

Offering the courses on-site has a number of advantages that needed to be replaced or replicated in some way when they were converted for online use. The textbook is chosen by the course instructor and this can be changed as new editions and new texts come onto the market relatively quickly. In addition to the course textbook, audiovisual equipment and a full local education library of teaching resources and research journals are available to these teachers. It is also easy to arrange visits to schools and other community organisations that are involved in ESL instruction and settlement concerns for newcomers to Canada. Teachers in these on-site intensive courses meet with each other for several hours during the day, not
only during class time, but also for lunch or any special event on campus. These regular face-to-face meetings encourage the fostering of relationships in and out of the classroom. The fact that many teachers involved in ESL instruction have traveled, lived in various countries, and are genuinely interested in different cultures and languages, makes for engaging classroom discussions and the active sharing of intercultural experiences. The atmosphere in the classroom tends to be lively, yet relaxed especially during the summer when teachers can concentrate on their own professional development without juggling the responsibility of classroom teaching at the same time.

However, by offering these courses online participation is opened up to more teachers [3], who are able to update and increase their qualifications because they can access them anywhere and can complete them according to their own time schedule. Traditionally, Part I has been the most popular course; however, with the new online format, more teachers are able to take Part II and Part III, respectively. How then did we convert the traditional summer TESL additional qualification courses to an online format?

The New Online TESL Course

Three professionally qualified ESL teacher trainers and one faculty coordinator with expertise in second language instruction and evaluation were involved in designing the three-part TESL course for online instruction. We had a series of preliminary meetings with each other and the coordinator of Continuing Education to divide up the tasks, choose textbooks and outline who was responsible to do what for the courses. We also attended sessions with computer specialists to become familiar with using Claris Homepage and the WebCT software. What is unique to an online distance education approach such as ours is the coordination of labour between content experts and software specialists. This collaboration does not take place in the traditional classroom, where teachers work individually planning their courses. After the initial group sessions and meetings, we were able to start to work on designing the courses using our own computers and coming together occasionally to iron out any difficulties and update each other about our progress.

At the initial stages, decisions had to be made with regard to the content, layout of the courses and evaluation. For example, there was some disagreement over the choice of textbooks for the three-part courses, as we realised that we would not be able to change the textbook or add major supplementary materials once the courses had started. Unlike on-site learning, where a textbook can be adapted to serve the needs of the students (in-service teachers) enrolled in the courses, in online learning much of the course revolves around the textbook material as tasks are related directly to specific chapters. In other words, the textbook is an integral part of the courses and it is very difficult to make modifications to the programme of study once the courses are up and running. Also, we are familiar with textbooks suited to on-site learning with their excellent suggestions for class discussions and activities. However, until we actually try one out, we do not know how appropriate or effective a particular text and related activities will be for use in the online format. Unfortu-
nately, we were not given time for developmental testing or opportunities for modifications based on feedback from both instructors and course participants after the first cycle of online teaching. It seems that the textbook was a given and it would be staying with the course for a substantial period of time.

Another point for consideration is that, although we agreed that there should be continuity between the three-part courses, we were aware of the potential possibility for repetitions, and possible potential redundancies. Ideally, there should be a transfer of skills and a flow of information so that one course builds upon the other; it was therefore important for the three course designers to outline their own aims and objectives for Parts I, II and III clearly. We worked as a team and decided that Part I would give an overview of language skill instruction with a focus on methodology, while Part II would include more theoretical components of language acquisition and cultural adaptation. Part III would involve more programme administration and analysis of policy issues. We decided, however, that repetitions were unavoidable and necessary. On the positive side, it does allow course participants to expand on and reinforce knowledge and skills learned from previous courses. However, we are currently considering including an online study guide for each part of the course in order to give participants an overview of the entire course.

What assumptions could we make about the teachers (course participants) taking the courses? When the course was offered on-site at the faculty, most of the teachers were based locally and were for the most part already familiar with the university and local community. Some of the teachers were teaching during the school year, and tended to take the on-site courses for professional development in the summer; others were trying to re-qualify to teach in the province after teaching overseas, while still others were retired and wanted the qualification in order to tutor ESL students locally or teach English overseas.

However, we had no idea who would be taking the online courses or where they would be located. Currently, course participants are required to have Ontario teaching certificates to take our additional qualification courses. It may now be feasible to include teachers from other provinces or, for that matter, other countries. We did assume, however, that most teachers would be native speakers of English or, at least, have an excellent command of the language, and so we decided not to utilise synchronous audio and video communication. As a mainly asynchronous tool, WebCT would be adequate for use in Canada, although in other parts of the world using a synchronous system on the Internet would be beneficial in that both non-native and native English speakers could interact and learn from each other.

Another dilemma concerned incorporating the practicum into Part I, when we knew that some teachers would not have access to ESL students. The practicum is a major part of the course and an element that teachers in the past have found to be particularly valuable. When the course was on-site, the instructor could make arrangements and monitor the pairing of teachers and ESL students. How were teachers going to find ESL students who wanted to be tutored on their own when the course was delivered online? In the end, we designed tasks related to working with ESL students and required the teachers to find their own students and document their experiences through journal writing. An alternative approach would
have been to allow teachers to tutor ESL students online, and set up a virtual ‘support’ group among both teachers and students to enhance the learning, and also fulfill the requirements of the practicum. This could be a feasible development for the future. In the end, we decided to ask the teachers to submit excerpts of their journal reflections online; these would include their lesson plans and their personal reflections on the tutoring. Reflections would be sent as a personal email to the instructor. What we had to take into consideration, however, were the ethical and privacy issues in our requests for information and reflections on teachers’ practices involving ESL students. The teachers are given the following standard message for all online courses during the first module: ‘In order to maintain the privacy of all members of the Ontario College of Teachers, candidates must not refer to any teachers, students, parents, schools, school administrators, school boards or school board employees by name in course discussions or assignments. Candidates must not give any information that might identify teachers, students, parents, school administrators, schools, school boards or school board employees.’ Indeed, it was paramount that we abide by this rule when eliciting information from participants.

As novices in online course design, the templates we were given from which to work—a standard format used for all online courses at the faculty—were invaluable in helping us to structure the course content. We were also able to gain access to an already completed and running Specialist course to use as a model. Each course has modules with a list of learning outcomes, activities and assignments, and a separate section for the readings and references related to each module. We decided to take a theme-based approach—each module focusing on a specific skill area, such as Teaching Reading or Current Trends in Student Language Assessment. The themes corresponded to various chapters in the textbook. Any assignment labelled as OFFICIAL meant that it was to be graded and so it had to include a rubric (marking scheme) for the teachers. Tasks that involved reading materials or reflection were labeled as PRIVATE; while tasks that involved sharing and discussing ideas were labeled as PUBLIC and would go on the Bulletin Board—our ‘virtual classroom’.

We realised that the outcomes and tasks for each module had to be spelled out very explicitly so that the online instructor (whoever he or she might be) could deliver the course smoothly. Finally, we requested that teachers keep a record of the number of hours spent completing the modules and forward this information to the instructor to monitor their learning and to be sure that the required 120 hours of instruction was fulfilled.

Advantages of Teaching Online

The more familiar and comfortable we became with the software, the more we realised the benefits of online learning. First, we did not need to feel restricted by a textbook, as we had assumed. To supplement chapter readings, we could list websites and online articles to which teachers could obtain access. Using the Internet, teachers could also search for articles relevant to their own needs. Indeed, it is safe to say that the web is the world’s largest library. For example, if the participants were elementary (Grades 1–8) schoolteachers, they could focus on
language learning for young children. For teachers in Ontario, they can also gain access to best practice in English language teaching and learning in other parts of the world. It is obviously important for us to provide guidance to our teachers (course participants) in learning how to search and screen for suitable and good quality materials in TESL. In fact, one of the introductory exercises for participants is to find and critique websites of their own choice and those of their classmates. We also assumed that teachers would have developed adequate search techniques in their exploration of the Internet, as this is a prerequisite to the successful gathering of information (Iseke-Barnes, 2001).

In addition, we realised that we could enhance learning with maximum use of the interactive electronic bulletin board with threaded discussions. Much of the research on online learning points to the benefits of using the bulletin board for discussions and the establishment of a community of students (Kirby, 1999; Lan, 1999; Quitadamo & Brown, 2001). There is great potential here for constructing knowledge in promoting unlimited amounts of interactivity and interaction between participants (in-service teachers in our case) posting messages and responding to fellow learners, participants interacting with the content and participants interacting with the course instructor (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). In fact, we decided to use participation in the virtual discussions as a component of the overall assessment for the course to reinforce the value of interaction in teachers’ professional development.

Evaluation for all the courses included participation in the Bulletin Board discussions and a portfolio summative assessment at the end. Other kinds of assignments, such as the practicum and journal component in Part I, or short papers on such topics as the Communicative Language Approach or Language Learning Styles and Strategies were included in particular modules. Again, the tasks tended to focus on Bulletin Board discussions rather than individual assignments sent to the instructor for evaluation. We wanted to maximise participant interaction so that they could become engaged in the learning process and establish a community of learners sharing and responding to each other’s ideas through the medium. As designers, we could provide a learning-rich framework or infrastructure; it was also the responsibility of the trained online course instructor to encourage critical thinking, facilitate, organise and keep discussions on a productive path, as well as providing insightful and on-going feedback (Feldberg, 2000; Snider, 2000; Goodyear et al., 2001). Research has stressed that it is the interplay between the teacher’s and students’ personalities that is essential to effective learning and the instructor should establish a level of trust, professional credibility, and cohesion among the course participants (Quitadamo & Brown, 2001; Winfield et al., 1998). In fact, what often determines the success of an online learning initiative is the quality of human interaction (Quitadamo & Brown, 2001).

Conclusions

There is no doubt that converting face-to-face courses into online study programmes is challenging. Essentially, it involves a change in mind-set from what was performed
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Traditionally to what we can do, and do better now, using a new technology. The course designers were required to learn new skills in using computer software, and to reframe components of traditional classroom instruction to make them fit into a different infrastructure, which would ensure maximum learning. What once put the teacher at centre stage in the classroom has now changed to a different dynamic in a user-driven, multidimensional learning environment. The flexibility is such that teaching and learning can take place at any time and place convenient to both course instructors and participants. It is important for course designers to keep positive during the design process—to keep looking forward to new possibilities. Rather than dwelling on what was done in the past, such as group presentations and classroom visits, we should focus on what can be done now, such as dynamic interactions with and among course participants on the Bulletin Board and immediate access to a wealth of resource materials on the Internet. Opportunities for learning expand and blossom when the computer is used to transport us away from traditional classroom walls (Brewer et al., 2001). Online learning and teaching are definitely the future direction for TESL teacher education. It is time to get on board!

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Notes

[1] WebCT is a leading provider of e-learning solutions for higher education, particularly in Canada.
[2] These teachers are certified to teach subjects in regular K-12 classrooms compared with classrooms that are designed especially for teaching English to students who use English as a second language (ESL students).
[3] The enrollment in TESL Part I for summer 2002 increased about 10 times compared with summer 2001. After a few years of insufficient enrolment to offer TESL Part II on-site, Part II was offered successfully in summer 2002 in the online format. Part III was offered for the first time in autumn 2002.

References


