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The Language Business

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Ms. Gamboa is a professional licensed teacher and a TESOL certified teacher and is currently the head teacher of a tutorial specializing in teaching English language online to non-English speakers. Her current job entails her to coordinate with the school's main office in Seoul, Korea with regards to curriculum, student-teacher assignment, checking of web-based progress reports and teacher evaluation. She used to be an entrepreneur dealing in custom-made and ready-to-wear clothing for ten years. Ms. Gamboa has a degree in Biology and has a Diploma in Computer Studies with a major in the Internet and Multimedia. She has been in the teaching field for 9 years and has experiences dealing with at-risk students, training out-of-school youth women from remote areas in English language and Computer Literacy, as well as heading physical plant committee for school accreditation. Ms. Gamboa is an IGCBP 2007 participant and a fellow of Diplo Foundation's delegation to the GK3 Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, recently held last December 11-13, 2007. She will be the IGCBP 2008 tutor for the Asia-Pacific region from March 3- May 15, 2008. In July of 2001, Ms. Gamboa was a Philippine delegate to the World Youth Day held in Toronto, Canada. Her areas of interest are in Education, Psychology of Language Learning, Computer Literacy Programs, Women Studies, E-commerce for developing countries, Internet-connected economy, Entrepreneurship, Internet Governance and other social issues that have direct impact on IG.

Abstract

E-learning has become a trend wherein people would opt to learn at their own pace. This need arises particularly when non-English speakers would want to learn English but do not want to go through the hassle of attending regular classes, thus, the option to study online is a good way for them to balance their work and study time. In fact, most of these students are traders who feel that learning English is an essential factor in doing business and getting foreign partners. This paper presents an overview of how there is a conflict between issues underlying the business side of an online tutorial and the pertinent issues of how English should be taught as a learning process. This overview will identify the argument between the business of online tutorial and the learning process itself and how it should be balanced, as well as the essential ingredients of successful online tutorials based on experiences of online tutorial schools in the Philippines.

Keywords: **e-learning; online tutorial; non-English speakers; Philippines**

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INTRODUCTION

E-learning is the use of technology, e.g. computers with Internet access, to facilitate learning. It is a “fad” (Jenkins and Visser, 2001) because more and more people use this as a means of training, usually to improve themselves and give them the necessary skills to apply in their line of work. It provides prospective students the choice to study at their own pace. The influx of South Koreans, Taiwanese and Japanese young adults going to the Philippines to study English is a phenomenon. The tuition fees are cheaper compared to enrolling in an Australian or Canadian university. They usually come here in groups and all the arrangements are done by an agency that handles all their accommodations and travel. They go to special classes in the universities here and most of them enroll in one-on-one tutoring with Filipino tutors in the rudiments of English grammar and conversation. After a few months of staying in the country, they go back to their homeland to either pursue further studies or find jobs. Armed with the knowledge of English, they become more confident to find better jobs in their homeland. This is the case only for those Koreans who can spare the time and money to travel abroad and study English. But a majority of these citizens, especially from South Korea, would want to do a follow up of their English studies so this is where online tutorials come in.

Why base the operation in the Philippines? Two answers: One is that majority of Filipinos speak very good English and second is that the workforce is cheap. Students pay in US dollars and instructors are paid in the currency where they are currently residing.

ONLINE TUTORIALS IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Underlying “Business”

Ownership of businesses in the Philippines (including ownership of land) by foreign nationals will only entitle them 40% of ownership and the remaining 60% will be duly-

owned by Filipino nationals (Manzala, 2003). For a successful venture such as an online tutorial would require both business partners to work at each other's end. For example, the Korean partner supplies the students in South Korea, while the Filipino partner supplies the instructors, as well as the equipment to deliver the lessons. The bulk of preparations will go to the Filipino counterpart who has to train the instructors in delivering the lessons and using VoIP (Voice-over-Internet-Protocol), as well as testing the equipment and Internet connection. The Korean counterpart creates the Korean website wherein students and instructors can log in to check on their progress reports.

The Technology

Having a good internet service is a big advantage. This kind of set-up actually works like a call center having own leased line but the cost is almost \$1100 monthly if calculated in Philippine currency. Using ADSL connection (Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line) may have its disadvantage. Once all computers are working at the same time, opening of browsers can be rather slow, as well as the sending of files less than 100 kb. There is also a lag in voice over. The moment this happens, it disrupts the entire operation. In ADSL, downloading is much faster than uploading. But in this case, uploading should be faster than downloading since this business operation requires files to be sent to the student during class. Actually, a 2 Mbps data rate would be sufficient to run at least 5 pc's working at the same time. To upgrade the ADSL connection, a SDSL (Symmetric Digital Subscriber Line) connection is much more advisable compared to ADSL for this kind of business operation. The SDSL connection both supports the same downstream and upstream traffic and sends data rates as much as 3 Mbps. Another option is getting another ADSL connection from another subscriber and distribute both ADSL connections from different subscriber in every other pc. That will be a cheaper alternative compared to paying 60% more every month for SDSL connection. This monthly calculation is based on a suggested quote from PLDT (Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company) MyDSL.

Updating Internet connection entails extra cost but can be rewarding for faster connection. This is the underlying idea to partially solve intermittent connection. Using Skype for VoIP application can be daunting. It is cheaper to use skype since PC to PC calls are free. It won't add up to overhead cost. But such VoIP application can bug down in the middle of a session. This will disrupt classes. It eats up the time for classes especially if there is a time-limit. Re-connecting alone after a drop call may take a few minutes at least. It is quite unreliable at times. But why stick to skype? It is free for PC to PC calls. It's a simple reason for that matter.

The Learning Process

Every prospective student goes through a level test with the head tutor. An excerpt from the company website explains why a level test is needed:

"A level test is given to a new student to determine level of English knowledge. This is scheduled based on student's convenient time and availability of head teacher. Once this is set-up, a level test is given. During the level test, the student will be asked several questions and based on student's knowledge of English, the teacher will recommend the level and a corresponding textbook to study." (Copyrighted 2007 SS

English Tutorial, Bacolod City, Negros Occidental, 6100 Philippines)

After the level test, the student chooses a schedule that will be convenient. At this point, adjustments in time are negotiated. One week is considered a free trial. This is a fair deal considering the entire week session is not counted in the actual number of regular sessions.

Furthermore, learning is interactive. The student gets to see the tutor via webcam and vice versa.

One contention lies on the premise that on the business end, the actual time for studying is only 25 minutes – no more and no less. It has been a long-standing argument from the start, and from actual experience, that 25 minutes per session is not enough to incorporate a lesson plan on language learning. You simply cannot charge the same rate if lessons are more than 25 minutes. That is business. If the lesson drags on to more than 25 minutes, then students pay extra.

Another contention is by Korean standards, 25 minutes and five times a week online class is roughly around \$106.00. Compare that to similar freelance online English tutors who charge \$15 per hour, the \$106.00 is a fair deal. The \$106.00 per month at 25 minutes each is around 20 sessions and that is 5 hours of classes. If you calculate the 5 hours at \$15 per hour, that will be \$75. It is lesser by \$31 to the actual 25 minute class, five times a week, in a month. But what most people fail to understand is that anyone can finish the \$75 5-session classes (at 15 dollars per hour) in less than a week – which is hurrying the lessons and telling yourself you got a crash course on English Language learning. This is only applicable for very advanced students. But for beginners and with low English background, you cannot hurry lessons that way just to save money. The heart of the matter is learning in spite of how much savings you can avail.

Essentially, language learning should encompass various areas of learning – reading, writing, listening and speaking. A business enterprise is put up for the sole purpose of making money. Whether or not these various skills in language learning have been taught, the rule of thumb is stick to time. It's a tough choice for an educator who is serious in getting the lesson across but with limited time. Cutting short the time would allow clients to renew when their sessions are up although this is not giving the tutor enough time for further exercises. So that leaves the student to study on his or her own. But at the same time, to hurry the classes in order to save some money is not helping the student either. In this case, the ideal time is 40 minutes per session.

CONCLUSION

Given the increasing prominence of the Internet in the world community, the use of internet-based courses especially for advanced study where the student already has a decent grounding of the subject, is a logical development. This especially holds true for the study of English. Anyhow, this is not only applicable for advanced students. Someone who knows very little English but is ashamed or embarrassed to study in a regular classroom can opt for online classes. Although it is advisable for beginning students to study in a real classroom environment and where total immersion is still the

most effective way to learn the basics of the language, online classes are becoming more of a logical choice for its anonymity in terms of even opting not to use a webcam. It's like learning from a live audio cassette player – amusing to say the least. Even flashcards for the English alphabet can be used using the webcam and “just read my lips” literally. Anything is possible!

Furthermore, students can fit their studies into their schedules, and do not have to travel to find people fluent in English. These teachers can be brought directly into the student's home or office. While there will always be a place for "analog" classrooms, e-learning will increasingly become a prominent tool for those seeking to better their skills and increase their value on the world market.

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