

From the digital coalface: Building a range of blended English-language communicative competence courses in partnership with corporate learning and development stakeholders

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the perceived needs of corporate learning and development teams with regard to language and communication training. Secondly, it offers an academic framework drawing on the work of leading writers in the field in order to integrate the lived curriculum development experience with a basis in theory. The paper then describes the process of course building, both regarding the pedagogical and technological elements of the development project. Finally, it offers an a posteriori set of findings regarding the necessary elements of a successful blended communicative competence course for corporate application.

Keywords: curriculum development; blended learning; corporate learning and development; communicative competence; flipped classroom; microlearning, CALL.

Introduction

Product development for corporate language training in 2019 takes place against a rapidly changing backdrop. Human resource departments are coming under increasing pressure to adapt to evolving requirements. A recent World Economic Forum report (2018, pg 6) lists “ubiquitous high-speed mobile internet; artificial intelligence; widespread adoption of big data analytics; and cloud technology” as key drivers of change and indeed these elements now feature regularly on the agendas of Learning and Development summits. The management consulting company Deloitte (2019) put out a report stating the need for companies to “craft approaches that allow their workers to learn as and when they see fit.” There is now a consensus on the requirement for large corporate training providers to embrace the new forms of technology and to integrate them into their pedagogical offering. Mobile learning and microlearning respectively have developed as a result of these needs.

A key indicator of the effectiveness of self-paced study is that of engagement. E-learning providers often spend a great deal of time in their sales communication showing how they track learner interaction with the platform.

One of the reasons for this is that learner engagement with fully self-paced solutions is stubbornly low across the board. Dr Katharine Nielson (2011) of the University of Maryland found in a study of self-paced learning by employees of US government agencies that the attrition rate (the rate of students dropping out of the program) was upward of 97%. Despite early hype surrounding the power of artificial intelligence solutions and their potential replacement of the human teacher, it is noteworthy that the training industry has discovered the limits of fully self-paced training approaches. Specifically in the field of language training, chatbots and virtual tutors have proved unable to act as credible interlocutors for corporate learners. This may be insoluble by technology. Paul Kinasevych (2018) puts this down to computers lacking what he refers to as an imaginary component of language. Jon Searle’s Chinese Room thought experiment (1980) was designed to show that mere syntactic processing did not amount to semantic understanding. And it is certainly arguable that business communication classes require a trainer with semantic understanding of the content of student written and spoken production. In fact, multiple studies have shown that the relationship between human teacher and student is a major driver of the motivation that drives the learning process.

Zhao et al. (2005) found advantages for blended learning (combining elements of online and face-to-face communication) over purely online learning experiences, a finding similar to that of this meta-analysis. Zhao et al. also found that instructor involvement was a strong mediating variable. Distance learning outcomes were less positive when instructor involvement was low.

(US Department of Education, 2010 Pg.74)

An interesting outcome of the emergence of artificial intelligence technologies in the workplace, has been a sharper focus on soft skills such as communicative competence. In order to build compelling arguments around the return on investment for language and communication training, a need has emerged for overarching taxonomies of can-do style outcomes. In this way, learning impact can be empirically assessed to a greater degree.

The advent of big data has led to a situation in which companies have become used to the ability to base investment decisions on objective data. Learning and development departments increasingly build the case for training expenditure on benchmarks such as test results, lesson attendance and engagement with the learning management system. Dashboards have become increasingly sophisticated as a result, allowing a range of visualizations and supporting a range of use cases.

Literature Review

In the introduction, I established the premise that corporate learning and development departments are in need of blended programs that develop communicative competence. But what is communicative competence?

Savignon (1972) described communicative competence as follows: “the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors.”

This sounds very much like what is required by our human resources stakeholders. We are not looking at precision in language form, but rather the active and functional ability to use language in context. What kind of syllabus could result in such an outcome? Epistemologically, we must see that it is not mastery of a static knowledge set that can result in this dynamic competence.

Reaching an understanding is the inherent purpose of human linguistic communication and is not based on

empirically validated or instrumental knowledge, but rather is based on knowledge that is consensually validated through what Habermas refers to as rational discourse.

Thomas, 2004

Thomas, citing Habermas and Gergen (1999), advances an argument that learning is socially constructed. Essentially, what counts as successful communication is group-determined. From this assertion, it follows that classroom instruction should follow an aligned methodological approach. The British Council states the following: “In a task-based lesson the teacher doesn’t pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it.” It is precisely this open-endedness of a good task-based lesson that mimics the demands on corporate learners at the point of work. They know generally which communicative tasks are required of them, whether it be telephoning, attending meetings, giving presentations or making smalltalk, but they cannot predict which language their counterparts will use, or which direction the discussion will take. Communicative success is also heavily dependent on the personality, language proficiency and communicative ability of the people in the room.

Prabhu (1987, pp. 70–1) argued that “task-based teaching operates with the concept that, while the conscious mind is working out some of the meaning-content, a subconscious part of the mind perceives, abstracts, or acquires (or re-creates as a cognitive structure) some of the linguistic structuring embodied in those entities, as a step in the development of an internal system of rules” If we accept this, we can see how task-based learning can provide an inductive learning experience where peers are guided by the trainer toward effective communication in English. It may be necessary for the trainer to input language at critical stages in the setup of a task, or to clarify or reformulate certain problematic utterances along the way, but generally the interaction between learners while completing the task should drive learning.

Another key focus that I established in the introduction was that of engagement in self-paced and blended learning. We know that many organizations are keenly focused on measuring and reporting on engagement as a key performance indicator of successful corporate learning. But how can we ensure engagement? Richards (2011) reminds us that “engagement is an active process, and it is the motivated learner who decides to engage.”

In fact, citing Johnson, Johnson and Smith, Richards appears to suggest that while learning analytics may be digital in nature, trainer-led task-based learning may be the answer:

Possibly the most direct action to improve academic engagement is to make learning activities more engaging by borrowing strategies from the Cooperative Learning movement of the 1990's. Positive interdependence in group work and small group sizes improve opportunities for peer interaction, and active participation in learning activities.

(Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998).

Curriculum building and related findings

From the introduction and literature review, it appears clear that in order to address modern requirements for business language and communication training, one must deliver a blended training offer that integrates mobile learning, an analytics dashboard, features a strong trainer-led virtual classroom component and engaging digital practice opportunities. It is also clear that there are certain pragmatic challenges that communicate learning designers must navigate.

Firstly, time constraints. "busy schedules, multiple commitments and limited budgets require that these training programs consume the least amount of time possible." (Thomas, 2004). These are very real constraints that force multiple compromises on the length of placement tests, training syllabus complexity, number of trainer-led sessions and so on. In this sense, successful corporate learning and development programs are masterpieces of negotiation. Indeed the commercial pressures of responding to tenders in time or launching a new product according to an ambitious deadline also bear on the development process. From the conceptual sketching out of curriculum structure, mode of delivery and product components to the quantification and resource allocation process for development, to the actual production of learning material and development of technological elements, time is a constant source of pressure. It is critical that communication remains healthy in the interface between the technology and pedagogy teams. Large scale corporate blended learning innovations involve software development, which brings in The Chief Technology Officer, product owners, user experience designers, data experts and software engineers. The impact of a large project may involve internal restructuring, which generates additional interpersonal and workflow issues.

Secondly, the need for granular, observable outcomes puts a great deal of emphasis on immediately observable

skill development. Longer-term and non-linear development processes, while not explicitly unwanted, risk being overlooked as a result. This reality places a premium on strong key account relationships with clients. Multiple renewals may be required to see the kind of deep progress required by human resources, but with each self-contained course maintaining credibility and delivering on even restricted outcome claims. This process requires clarity of communication between product development and the sales and marketing organizations within the Education Technology company. It is not always advisable to promise proficiency within three weeks.

Thirdly, the social-constructivist mechanism behind successful task-based learning may run up against opposition from those looking for a positivist style list of reliable outcomes such as one may expect from a fire-safety compliance course. Successful communicative competence training places an onus on the participant to actively take part, take risks and leave their comfort zone. For this reason individual learner experiences will differ between courses and those who invest greater energy and focus will generally see a return on their personal investment. This means an unspoken contract between learner and training organization -one that can be backed up by learning analytics data. Essentially, the probability of success can be tracked back to engagement with the course. A strong blended program should enable this discourse with relevant and accessible data linking these phenomena.

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