Designing learning for learners:

A study of learning English through distance at USP Emalus Campus, Vanuatu

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Abstract

In a region where English is an alien language but a seemingly important one for communication and education, Pacific Islanders have always faced a situation where they have to grapple with studies in a language so few of them call their own. For twelve countries belonging to the University of the South Pacific (USP) region, tertiary education has meant a need for good and comfortable command of the English language where students can be at ease to express their thoughts and intentions. Fluency has been an increasing urgency to address. With distance learning, materials have had to be tailored in ways that this mode brings its content in the most efficient and effective way possible for the success of the student. These challenges may put the average Ni Vanuatu in a situation where more effort is required in mastering a language enough to be able to study successfully at tertiary level. With proper and appropriate design of the learning materials, students are able to bridge these challenges and thus complete their courses successfully.

Introduction

This case study looks at how designing learning materials affects a multilingual society as Vanuatu. This paper presents the challenges a student faces in the home front linguistically as well as adapting to a new mode of study. It is will be seen that with careful planning of course content, a course presented in any mode can be effective in harnessing a successful class of students, and in our situation, the success of print English and skills distance courses.

Photo 1: Vanuatu students studying by distance.

Language and education

Vanuatu's students have a language situation that is often seen as a compounding one especially as it provides a traditionally multilingual environment for its peoples. It has been argued that multilingualism is the norm in today's global environment; this is because it is increasingly becoming important for users of language to acquire more than one language in order for them to participate fully (Graddol, 2000) in the global scene. Vanuatu's multilingualism lies in its people's

ability to speak more than one indigenous language. In addition, its colonial history left behind not one, but two languages that are seen as official operating languages: English and French. Although a multilingual's forte is in the ability to use more than one language, in a situation like Vanuatu's, users are forced to use a foreign language altogether in education and other official uses; that is, either English or French. These languages are seldom used in normal domestic situations. In the classroom if forced to use it, a student will oblige though preferring to use the lingua franca, Bislama (a dialect of Melanesian Pidgin) instead. If necessary, either or both of the official languages will be used in the running of education and government.

Educational facilities are spread far and wide in Vanuatu, and not all of these from K-12 are fully equipped with a library and other learning facilities. Tertiary institutions are found only in the main urban or government centres. Any other situational occurrences of English are found in overseas music, movies and DVDs as well as from television programs and other media. Students therefore are also exposed to English in social contexts.

Because of this language environment for the average ni-Vanuatu student, fluency in a foreign language that seems to be tied only to education can be an arduous task. Although this may sound daunting, fortunately, this arduous task can be overcome. With the ability to acquire languages, many ni-Vanuatu become very fluent in their use of the English language.

As students seek further education, the likely choice is to attend the local USP Emalus campus located in Port Vila. In admitting students from varying secondary backgrounds, the local campus requires the students to sit a diagnostic test to ascertain their entry level to studies offered. Their ability in the command and use of English determines this level.

An added supposedly seen 'handicap' for these students is the fact that English courses offered at Emalus (apart from law courses) are in the distance and flexible learning (DFL) mode, a new method of learning for them. Despite the increasing use of the internet in course offerings, the English courses are offered in the print mode. Most of the other courses are offered in this mode also. The real difficulty for the ni-Vanuatu student lies in the fact that as a traditionally illiterate society, reading as a habitual action is acquired only in school. Now, if schools are ill-resourced, then reading is only seen as an action for the classroom only, or for obtaining specific information from the print media.

So combined, a lack of fluency in the English language, a new and unfamiliar mode of study and a lack of reading background, provides a great recipe for failure among ni-Vanuatu students. Thus, USP has endeavoured to deal with this grave situation.

Reasons for these courses

Although students may work their way up the educational ladder from K-13, many students continue to struggle with English fluency. There are many who are push-outs whom for social, infrastructure or elimination reasons are unable to further themselves.

USP offers English or skills based courses at 3 levels, these being, 2 courses at pre-degree level and another 2 at degree level (see Table 1). At another more community based level, USP offers a course aimed at assisting "mature aged students who may have left schooling early, or a long time ago" (USP 2008 Calendar). This course is part of the basic preparatory program which includes other courses like mathematics and accounting.

Table 1

Level	Course Code	Course title
Pre – Degree	LLP13	Pre-tertiary English
	LLF11	Communication and Study Skills
Degree	LL114	English for Academic Purposes
	EL001	English Language Skills
Continuing Education	CCE004	Basic English Skills

Below is a brief description of courses:

CCE004 – The Basic English Skills course provides relevant English skills to enable individuals to develop functional literacy understanding.   Students are expected to be able to read well, use the dictionary effectively, form words into legible sentences and be able to complete pre-degree courses they enrol in (Basic Preparatory Programme brochure 2007)

LLP13 – This course aims to increase confidence, accuracy and fluency in the use of spoken and written English (USP Calendar, 2008: p 215).

LLF11 – This course aims to help students increase their proficiency in various study skills and aspects of communication in preparation for studies at post-Foundation level. Areas covered include: note-taking, writing a summary, paragraph structuring, essay writing, comprehension, intensive and extensive reading, using a dictionary, effective use of the library, critically examining written texts and oral expression (USP Calendar, 2008: p 215).

LL114 – Students are expected to have achieved a proficiency in academic writing, reading and speaking sufficient to support their language needs in courses in the humanities, social science or sciences and in future professional tasks. The course is designed to provide flexibility to cater for the practical language requirements for students studying in the above areas (USP Calendar, 2008, p 215).

EL001 – This aims to enable first year students to improve their English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, in the context of their fields of study. In completing this course the students will be able to produce and understand both spoken and written English more accurately, fluently and appropriately (USP Calendar, 2008, p,186).

Who are the users

Being mostly high school push-outs from a system of education that filters students through national examinations at years 8, 10, 12 and 13, these push-outs come from varying backgrounds from rural to urban. Many rural students have had to migrate to the urban area to be fully served by the campus, although some choose to be located near one of the two centres on the islands of Tanna and Santo. Students may also choose to remain in their home villages and study but very few opt to do so. There are also mature students who have decided to return to improve their qualification.

Problems encountered
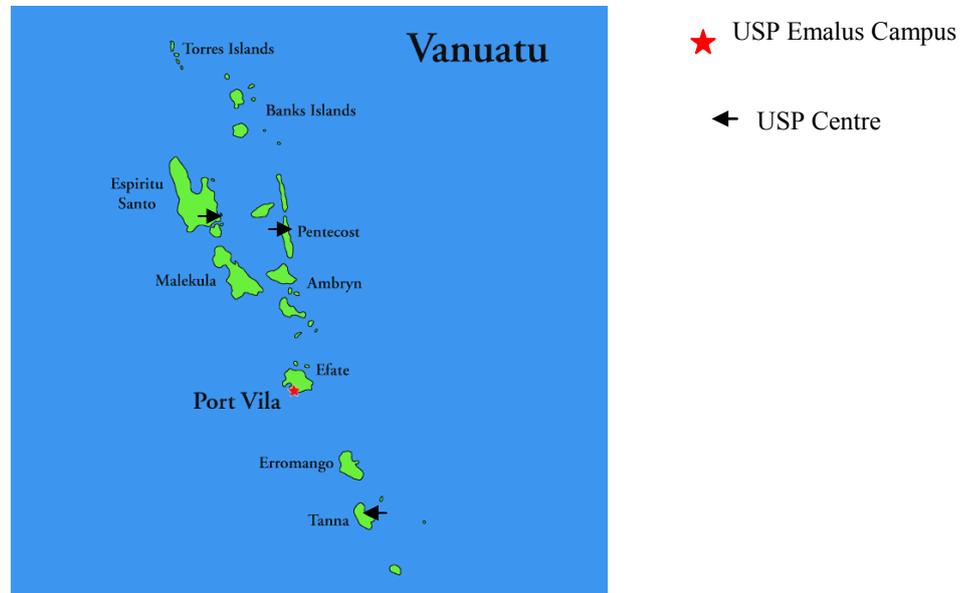
[Source: Pacific Travel Guide online, 2006]

DFL students in Vanuatu are served by a campus situated in Port Vila as well as three centres on other islands of the country (See map). Certain high schools in the country have opted to use the pre-tertiary programs of the university also. As in other Pacific countries, telecommunications and in some cases, basic communication by land, sea or air is difficult or expensive. This barrier adds to the frustration of the student who wants to study in his home environment.

DFL materials are dispatched to wherever the students are located. Although many students use the centres or sub centres for the collection of assignments, the majority will move to Port Vila to live with relatives or guardians and use the campus facilities there. This in itself poses further social problems for the students.

Even with students being situated near the campuses, the problem of attendance of tutorials or to make use of the facilities available is another hindrance to the study habits of the student. Not only is this a problem but it is further compounded by the fact that the availability of the physical infrastructure at the campus is inadequate. Most students are not given the luxury of study facilities in the homes they live in, and as with Pacific culture, most homes house various members of the extended family making it a difficult study environment.

If the student chooses to remain in the village the challenges faced include the lack of a tutor available for assistance. Language difficulties may also arise if the student does not have a comfortable command of English. As is always the situation, the course materials collected are the only means for learning. It is unlikely for there to be additional resources apart from oral sources.

How have these problems been addressed through better course design

The life cycle of a print course at USP is 5 years. When a course is first offered it is termed as New. A course writer may choose to make minor adjustments (MA) to the course after the first semester of offering. After 3 years of offer as MA, the course is then due for revision and will be offered the following semester as Revised. Following that, the revised course will continue to evolve through this 5 year cycle. Table 2 shows the evolution of the English and skills courses.

Table 2

Course	Status	Year	Comments
CCE004	First offered MA	2005 2006	
LLP13	First offered New Edition New Edition MA Revised MA	1981 1987 1994 1998 2006 2007	English Introductory A Preliminary English Pre-tertiary English
LLF11	First offered Revised Revised	1983 1993 2005	
LL114	First offered Revised MA	1995 2007 2008	
EL001	First offered Revised MA	2006 January 2006 June 2007	

These English and skills courses have been used since the university offered courses through the pint mode. CCE004, LL114 and EL001 have been latest additions, LL114 has been offered over the last 13 years with EL001 being the baby emerging 2 years ago. LLP13 has been on offer since 1981 while LLF11 emerged in 1983.

The courses are written by course writers who being subject experts work closely in hand with instructional designers who help coordinate the course writing process. It is on the advice and collaboration of the instructional designer and the course processing team with the course writer that a course gets put together.

In offering and producing courses, it has been imperative for materials produced to be user friendly and stimulating to the end user. Prior to 2004, courses produced by USP's DFL section were produced using a varying degree of design templates. Inconsistency in the design of courses that belonged to one program existed, though instructional designers would endeavour to ensure that consistency existed within one course itself. Improvements have been made to ensure that the end users get the maximum learning out of the materials they receive, and particularly for these English and skills courses which are compulsory within their own levels.

In 2004, the Bachelor of Education (BEd) Primary program underwent significant changes to the layout and design of its courses. This proved to be very well received by its students and DFL decided to use a similar approach to the further development of other courses. The BEd primary template (as it then became known) is now currently being used (see Appendix) by DFL though some degree of flexibility is allowed to suit a course's needs.

Bearing in mind students whom have not travelled widely out of their region or even their own country, instructional designers have had to contextualise the learning matter. Study aids such as icons used had to reflect the Pacific theme, a variety of examples from the Pacific were sought to be used within the text if necessary. Student mentors were injected in appropriate parts of the unit to give tips, hints or useful information. These were proved useful as they took the place of real life mentors especially for isolated students. Table 2 shows samples from various English and skills courses.

Table 2

Icons	Examples in LLF11
	These icons are acceptable within the Pacific context.
Examples	Example in LL114
	But if you are still left with no clear proposition to write about, then here is a method for making a proposition for yourself.
	1) First take the overall subject – for example, **cyclones.** This is very broad and we could write almost anything about it so we need to bring this down to something manageable.
	2) Now limit it – **cyclones in the South West Pacific.** Now we only have to write about cyclones that occur in one place, not *all* cyclones anywhere in the world. But we still don't have a clear idea of exactly what aspect of cyclones in the South west Pacific we are going to deal with. We need an issue.
	This example uses a natural disaster that is familiar Pacific-wide.
Mentors	Example in LL114
	ANYBODY (no matter how intelligent or how stupid) can put material on to the Net. This means that articles can **sometimes** be: • Ignorant • Inaccurate • Racist, sexist, crude, violent • Poorly researched SO: BE CAREFUL!!! Using a change of font (Comic Sans MS) creates a peer connection with the student. The model used is a Pacific islander who is wearing an outfit familiar in the region.

Instructional design not only deals with aesthetically satisfying course material, but it also seeks to advise on careful and precise use of language so students maximise their learning through a minimum of words. The trick of the trade lies in avoiding overburdening students with irrelevant material but to work with a minimum with maximum effect.

After major revision of these courses especially LLP13, LLF11 and LL114, students and tutors of these courses have indicated them as being user-friendly. Instructional designers in collaboration with the course writers have aimed to ensure that material produced are compact enough for students to study effectively. Included in the course packages are multi-media such as DVDs, which aim to bring today's technology into the study materials. The catch in this is not to include these media for the sake of using them but to utilise them so components of teaching English can be properly taught.

Designers aim to use less of written text and aim for activity-based learning to enforce content. This is very relevant in a traditionally illiterate society where people learn through continuously repeated action. Content material that is separated with activities makes use of this innate ability to the fullest.

In 2007 instructional designers in DFL introduced course design workshops where writers of distance courses throughout the university were invited to be guided through the basics of writing a print course. This was seen as necessary as many course writers were lecturers who were employed based only on their content knowledge but lacked teaching or course development skills. These workshops proved successful as improvement has been noticed in work that has been submitted for development. These workshops continue to be held at Laucala Campus and have been by request taken to other campuses and institutions also.

Although we focus here only on English and skills print courses, it is paramount that once these compulsory courses have been shaped properly, then its students can be comfortable with their shield of fluent English in pursuing other distance courses and completing them satisfactorily.

Photo 2: Course writers attending a workshop in DFL print course design

Conclusion

In order for a student to successfully complete a course through DFL, their individual situation must be carefully considered and satisfied. Designing an English and skills course therefore must embody these factors so multilingual situations such as those of Vanuatu cannot be ignored. Instructional design plays a major role in allowing a student to participate fully and successfully in any course in distance learning. Although it may seem that designing is mostly for cosmetic purposes, it is not truthfully so. Cosmetics tied with careful use of English can greatly aid a student who is aiming for fluency in a language that is not his own. Vanuatu students thus continue to benefit from these design approaches.

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Photos

Photo 1 by Jill Awa, USP Emalus Campus, Port Vila, Vanuatu.

Photo 2 by DFL, Centre for Educational Development and Technology, USP, Laucala Campus, Suva, Fiji Islands.

Appendix 1: BEd Primary Template

1

UNIT TOPIC
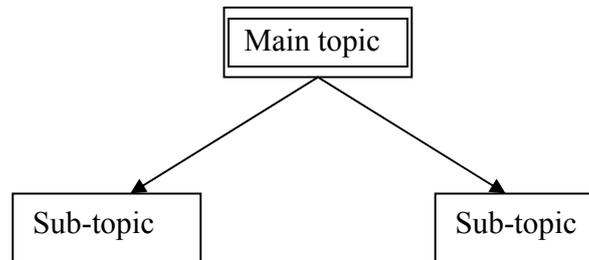
Unit sub-title

prepared for the course team by

Course Writer

Overview

This is a general introduction to the various sub-topics to be covered in the unit and how the relate to the previous unit of study.

Concept map

This is helpful to express the core ideas in a topic. Different types of mapping are available but it is important to be consistent throughout the course book.

```
                    ┌──────────────┐
                    │  Main topic  │
                    └──────────────┘
                       ╱        ╲
                      ╱          ╲
          ┌─────────────┐    ┌─────────────┐
          │  Sub-topic  │    │  Sub-topic  │
          └─────────────┘    └─────────────┘
```

Study organiser

Before you begin this unit, please check through your study organiser. It shows the topics that we'll be covering, the skills you need to acquire (the objectives) and the activities you'll do to help you acquire these skills.

Topic	Objectives	Activities

Introduction

This is a motivator – something that will gain the students interest and encourage them to read the unit.

1.1 Main topic heading

This is body text, set at Times New Roman 12pt.

▸ All lists will be formatted like this. The style is the same as body text; however there is also the inclusion of the bullet point.
  – second level lists should be formatted like this.
▸ The second point follows on with a 3pt break in the middle.

Subheading 1

Numbered lists will be formatted in this way:

1. list number
2. list number
   a. list number (2nd level)
   b. list number (2nd level

Comments and notes/ideas for the student – can be study tips, hints for the classroom, suggestions for further reading etc. To be placed near right margin.

Subheading 2

> *This is a quote. It is centred and indented on both sides, and italicized. All quotes must indicate the source, and this is done immediately following the quote, right-justified.*

Quote source, 2005 p.34

Name of activity

_____

_____

_____

_____

Summary

A summary at the end of a unit will help the learner by:

- briefly reviewing what has been covered by the section;
- repeating key points to reinforce learning;
- providing a point of reflection on the content; and/or
- leading into and linking with the next unit.

Glossary

It's important that you have a strong understanding of the key terms that will be used throughout this course. Start to develop your own glossary by completing the following table, filling in the terms that relate to the given definitions.

Keyword, keyword, keyword . . .

References

APA style

Further reading

Feedback on selected activities

Feedback on Activity 1

Perhaps the main point that you should note here is that . . .

Or

Here are my thoughts on this. Are yours similar? Make sure you discuss them in your tutorial session with your tutor and colleagues.