Enhancing Learning at a Distance Through Listening: Strategies of Student Support in Teaching and Learning in Open Distance Learning.

Dr. Kofi Poku QUAN-BAFFOUR

Institute for Curriculum & Learning Development
University of South Africa
quanbkp@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT The traditional mode of delivery where Distance Education institutions merely send out study materials and their learners study, perform some learning tasks, return them for assessment and feedback is inadequate and outdated. This mode of delivery without support could be one of the causes of high student attrition (failure and dropout). The traditional mode of delivery in Distance Education institutions now faces the challenge of varying its delivery mode in order to make course materials more accessible and flexible for learners. A learner support system in Distance Education includes guidance on learning and writing skills, assisting students to acquire knowledge and cognitive skills and even tutoring that offers limited face-to-face presentations to learners in groups or as individuals. This paper explores how to support distance students through listening. Listening in Open Distance Learning is facilitated by a variety of audio materials that include audio cassettes, Compact Discs (CDs) and radio broadcasts. The particular focus of this paper is on listening to CDs and audio cassettes. The paper argues that supporting distance learners through auditory perception can have positive impact on learning.

Introduction

In many parts of the developing world there are higher education options that offer print-based distance education (DE) programmes. Most of these print-based DE institutions still operate through the traditional correspondence mode of delivery, where an institution sends out study materials with assignments to students to complete and return for assessment and feedback. Many of the print-based DE or Open and

Distance Learning (ODL) institutions devise attractive marketing strategies and succeed in getting lots of students registered for their courses, but do not offer adequate academic support. This correspondence mode without academic support could be a "recipe" for the high rate of student attrition in many DE or ODL programmes. Lamenting about this unfortunate situation, Simpson (2000: 1) has this to say: "in some ways, student support has perhaps not received the attention it has deserved. This may be because it is seen as less glamorous than other activities in ODL or peripheral to the real business of developing materials. Or perhaps the managers of ODL programmes have not often been in the position of new unqualified learners on a distance education course and find it hard to empathise with how highly such learners value support". ODL practitioners offering print-based courses, have the moral responsibility to give their learners "customer care" or academic support to enable them to achieve their study goals. Wolfe and Johnstone (1999) appropriately points out that quality distance education (teaching and learning) requires excellent student support services, well planned instructional design and delivery, that allows the learner to learn at his/her own pace and a reliable technology. Apart from all facilities a caring culture must include those elements that enhance effective learning. Student support in print-based ODL programmes may be administrative (eg. guidance on registration matters) or academic (eg. tutorials around the course work). However, supporting distance learners through audio material has not been given the much-needed attention it deserves. Listening in print-based ODL programmes relates to a variety of audio materials such as radio and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes or CDs. The assumption of this paper is:

1. Radio and television broadcasts are not flexible as compared to CDs and audio cassettes.

2. The learner does not have control over the use of radio and television broadcast times.

3. UNISA, the main print-based ODL institution in South Africa, does not have dedicated radio or TV channels, but Unisa already has very good facilities for CD and audio cassette production and reproduction, making them very cost effective.

Auditory Perception and Learning

Teaching – whether face-to-face or at a distance – aims at assisting learners to unlock their potential in order to acquire specific knowledge and skills. To this end, whatever the educator does to enhance learning (ie acquiring, mastering and retaining of relevant information) through the sense of hearing is of utmost importance to the learner. Hornby (2003: 864) for instance defines perception as the way you notice things especially with the senses; an idea; a belief or an image you have as a result of how you see or understand something. Perception, in the view of Vrey (1990: 19), is a unitary process in which sensation hinges on meaning and meaning on sensation, and sensing and finding meaning occur simultaneously. It may also be seen as a process by which significance is attached to the sensation bombarding the brain. Perception can be described as a process which strictures the stimulation, organising it into a foreground, appearing against a background and bringing past experience to bear on the sensations in order that they can be understood in a meaningful context (Quan-Baffour 1995: 25). Perception – that is, knowledge and understanding- is the foundation of the intellect. In fact it is the basis or brick and mortar for constructing a world of meaning – bit by bit. Perception occupies human beings' mental space and it is sandwiched between sensation and conception in the developmental process of thought. The human being is a perceiver of his/her environment not by choice but by the nature of existence. Every individual is endowed with the gift and power of perception and we all learn, know and adapt to our environment through perception. Ralph, Robert and Ondrejko (1994: 92) point out that perception is also selective in terms of what is most important at any given moment and what is important is partially determined by the changing goals and sub-goals the actor contrasts as action unfolds. In the context of skilled action an individual's goals for upcoming action direct perceptual selection.

The above discussion indicates that perception simply refers to the meaning that the brain ascribes or attaches to information supplied to it by the senses. Auditory perception, therefore, is the ability of the brain to make contact with the outside world through the sense of hearing. As humans we search for and receive information through hearing, feeling or

seeing. Through these senses information is recorded in the brain where it is literally digested and interpreted for understanding. Perception thus assists humans to convert raw data into meaning.

Auditory perception (ie, hearing and listening) plays an important role in ODL environment. Hearing serves a vital function in human lives, and listening is the chief mode of learning. It is through hearing and listening that much learning takes place among most people. Hearing is the primary channel for language acquisition and human being's first language system is auditory. Hearing precedes action. About 75% of what we learn as adults is through listening. Listening takes place first before cognition - a process by which knowledge and understanding are developed in the mind- occur. This indicates that listening is the pivot around which most of the things we learn as individuals revolve. In a nutshell, auditory perception enables the distance learner to critically evaluate and meaningfully process information transmitted to the brain via the sense of hearing thereby making learning possible through listening. Auditory perception enhances memory - ie. the ability to remember what the learner hears - and thereby enables a learner to relate information correctly and in a correct order. Through hearing the learner becomes aware of the relevant information in the learning environment. It is also through hearing that human beings can understand speech and speech is our chief medium for acquiring and imparting knowledge. In a teaching and learning environment we, in most cases, use speech. Butterworth (1994: 130) notes; through language we may simultaneously experience primary and higher- order consciousness in interaction.

Hearing and listening are also important means of appreciating our environment. Galvin (1988: 4) for instance points out that listening is a process of receiving, interpreting, evaluating and reporting to messages. It is not just letting sound waves beat on your eardrums. Once you receive a message through your ears and also through your eyes, you must interpret the message on the basis of your experience, evaluate your thoughts and/or feelings about the message, and then respond. Kaye (2002: 4) adds that a social constructivist perspective integrates an individual's cognitive and social environments but also attaches critical importance to the social negotiation of meaning, supported by collaborative construction of knowledge.

The value of CDs and audio cassettes in print-based ODL programmes

CDs and audio cassettes have importance in print-based ODL environment despite the proliferation of high technology media available. Commenting on the value of audio cassette, in particular, Bates (1990: 101) appropriately argues that there are important lessons to be learned from this humble and unsung 'low tech' medium which needs to be applied to the more publicised 'high tech' media. With the advancement in technology and its application as medium of instruction many ODL practitioners are likely to regard new technologies as solutions to distance teaching and learning problems without considering the needs of their learners and the type of technological medium that could be more effective in their particular context. Supporting this view point Harry and Khan (2000: 136) write:

> It is inevitable that new technologies will continue to
> emerge in the coming years and will be sought after for
> use in Distance Education. The experience of the last
> twenty years points to the likelihood that the of the day
> will look upon older technologies as less desirable and
> less acceptable simply because they are older. The potential
> effectiveness of older technologies can easily be forgotten
> in the waves of publicity and advertising which new
> technologies receive. It is especially important in basic
> education that the technologies employed should be
> as accessible as possible and should match as closely as
> possible the needs of the student.

fashion

The pedagogical value of 'low tech' media - CDs and audio cassettes- as media of instruction in print-based ODL context is very relevant today especially in the developing countries where accessibility to 'high tech' instructional media such as computers and the internet for obvious reasons is very limited. The pedagogical importance of CD and audio cassette in teaching and learning at a distance include the following:

- they are a flexible and controllable media;
- they are convenient media of instruction because they can be replayed;
- they can be effective teaching media and involve the learners;

- ◆ they can be used as resources;
- ◆ they can be used as support for different types of learners.

CDs and audio cassettes are flexible and controllable media. The learner has control over their pedagogic advantage of being started and stopped at any time and allowing the selection and review of the material contained in them. In view of their flexibility, the learner can play-back both media as many times as required until a lecturer's point becomes much clearer to him/her. The student can also pause, stop or reverse them and write notes at his or her own pace. Emphasising this point of flexibility, Crisell (1992: 111) writes: "cassettes allow learning-pace to be adjusted to the needs of the individual. They are student- not teacher-centred, and it is not surprising that they are superseding live broadcasts at all levels of education".

CDs and audio cassettes are convenient media of instruction, especially in print-based ODL programmes. Once a learner acquires these sound media, they will always be available and can be used at his/her convenience. For example, in view of their portability, the media can be taken along to work or on a journey and listened to at lunch break, as one drives or at home when cooking.

These educational media, [Audio Cassette and CDs] in the words of Evans and Hawkridge (1999: 11), are the means by which something is communicated between teacher and learner, and possibly vice versa. They are channels through which educational texts or messages are communicated. Texts can be words (written or spoken), images (still or moving) or even sounds (tunes and codes). They refer to any continuous piece of spoken or written language that is meaningful. In fact media require different technologies to characterize and shape different types of educational texts. Audio Cassettes and CDs as educational media can be designed in such a way that they provide pauses in the instruction while the learner carries out some learning tasks before returning to them for correct answers. A well-designed CD and audio cassette can be effectively used as teaching media. For example, when and where it is dialogically designed, they can involve the distance learner in a lesson and thus make the lesson more learner – centred. Both CDs and audio cassettes can be integrated

into print by referring the learner to sections of the study guide or a prescribed text book as he or she listens to them. This makes learning more interactive. O' Sullivan (1993: 180) for instance points out that in interactive instruction the teacher acts as a partner, sharing responsibility for learning with the student, rather than the traditional manager of time and practice. Interactive instruction calls on teachers to demonstrate and share their expertise with students, instead of telling students what to do and leaving them to get on with it. The interactivity and flexibility of CD and audio cassette allow the learner to play back both media as many times as required . This makes direct instruction possible by assisting the learner to master techniques or skills through repetition.

CDs and audio cassettes can also be used as a resource material by study groups. Distance learners enrolled for the same courses and living within the same vicinity could form study groups, meet regularly to play, listen and discuss the contents of these media sent in by their print-based ODL institution. Such regular discussions may not only help in forming good study habits among distance learners but also offer co-operation and support needed by the "lonely" distance learner at the countryside. Learning is a social activity, and by bringing learners together to listen to and discuss the contents of an auditory medium such as audio cassettes or CDs, learners may enjoy the benefits of peer mediation, tutoring and group support. Although the lecturer may not necessarily be known to the learners or physically present, his/her voice heard in the presentation acts as a powerful medium of instruction and support that can take the distance out of distance learning.

These media of instruction (audio cassette and CD) can be used to support different kinds of learners in different ways. Slater (1998: 119) for instance points out that most of the objects and events that we experience are inter-modal in that they provide information to more than one sensory modality. For example, the sighted, the visually challenged and the physically impaired learners could benefit from these sound media. Because they are easy to operate, portable, cheap and durable, CDs and audio cassettes fit the circumstances of many kinds of learners. These sound media can substitute words or supplement them, and this makes them more suitable for the visually impaired and even for sighted students

who do not like much reading. As Rowntree (1992: 108) aptly states: "the main benefit of sound is to reduce the number of printed words required to be read by the learner, whether these are on a page or on a screen". Thus CDs and audio cassettes, as media of instruction, can give learners relief from reading and also provide them with new ideas that may be difficult to express in writing.

CDs and audio cassettes are very useful media in teaching language courses. These audio media are particularly effective in teaching new words, spellings, tenses, correct pronunciation of words, sentence formation and structure because of their advantage of sound.

In summing up the pedagogic importance of audio materials as a medium of instruction, one can say they can be used:

- ◆ To help learners make the best use of their time by giving them a means of learning while doing other things (eg. cooking);
- ◆ To talk them through tasks like studying a map or a table of figures - where they might find it distracting to have to keep turning aside to look at written guidance;
- ◆ To help learners practice skills;
- ◆ To make teaching more human and personal;
- ◆ To encourage or motivate learners;
- ◆ To touch learners' feelings and attitudes;
- ◆ To bring to learners the voices of people who would be unable or unwilling to say anything in writing;
- ◆ To provide "source materials" (eg. excerpts from an interview for learners to analyse or react to).

Learning design of audio material to enhance learning

Learning design involves the proper arrangement and ordering of learning material in such a manner that it enhances learning. In this regard to design audio material for learning certain fundamental design issues must be considered by the course designer. Some of the pertinent design issues are briefly discussed here.

Statement of lecture outcomes

The learning designer must inform the audience about the expected

outcomes of the audio lecture that should be listened to. O' Sullivan (1993: 170) appropriately points out that the quality of instruction includes telling students what they are supposed to learn, providing adequate materials, planning and ordering the steps in learning. Student ability to understand would encompass such variables as language comprehension and ability to figure out what the task is and how to go about it. The outcomes or purpose for listening to the audio lecture must therefore be stated at the beginning of the lecture because the learner must have a reason to listen to the audio material. The clear statement of outcomes would indicate to the learner the importance of the lecture.

Customising contents to learner needs

The contents of the audio material must be customised to the learning needs of the learner. In this regard, it is crucial for the course designer to know and consider the profile of the target group/audience in order to meet their learning needs and the the kind of learning medium they can afford. Emphasising the importance of learner in ODL material design Rowtree (1994: 46) writes: my learners are paying for the package themselves so I must try to avoid expensive media; may not see any obvious reason why they should study the package so I must emphasise how the package might benefit them (in their work). Knowledge of the learner profile could assist the course designer to determine the language competency of the audience. This knowledge would enable the course designer to use language which the audience could comprehend.

Sequencing audio material

The course designer must sequence the audio material to reinforce the stated outcomes. The learning material must have a definite order. It must be arranged in succession of events. The learning experiences should be organized around series of tasks to enable the learner to carry them out in an orderly fashion. Rowtree (1994: 96) suggests that the sequence should be:

- Chronological - where it makes sense to discuss topics in the order in which they happen over time.
- Structural logic- where certain ideas or skills must be tackled earlier in order for later ones to make sense or

♦ Problem- centred – where your sequence arises out of getting learners to explore some central problem or case.

Thus the content of the audio material must be designed in such a way that it builds on the competencies of the learner.

Inclusion of learner activities

The designer of audio material should include activities for the learner to complete, either for self-assessment or for the lecturer to assess. Such learner activities should relate to the outcomes set for the course. In other words, they should be based on the contents of the audio material in order to make learning very meaningful. Dhanarajan (2001: 28) adds that the core elements of learner support in ODL include among other things, the following:

♦ A culture of active learning including questions, feedback, alternate views, writing, listening and sharing.

♦ Opportunities for peer learning have to be created to enable learners to share ideas and respond to ideas of others.

♦ Constant feedback which is prompt and timely.

♦ Clear indications of the amount of time to be spent on a task and specific deadlines for the accomplishment of the tasks.

Design to integrate audio into print

The main purpose of audio or sound medium in any ODL environment is to offer learners maximum academic support through listening. To be able to offer this support effectively, however, there is a need to integrate the sound medium firmly into print – which is still the main teaching material. In teaching situations, it is a common knowledge among educators that in many cases no single medium is capable of effectively teaching a lesson. This is why distance educators must not depend on a single medium of instruction if their lessons are to be meaningful. Perraton (1980: 18) is more than apt in saying that the achievement of teaching and learning objectives does not depend on a particular medium of instruction; rather on the pedagogical quality and clarity of presentation, the relevance of the content and the motivation and interest of the learners are the significant variables.

Rowtree (1994: 110) adds that:
your open learning materials are likely to be full of new ideas,
new theories and new methods – new to the learner, that is.
They will all be capable of altering the ways your learners
See the world and the ways they act upon it. But your new
ideas will get across to your learners only if:

- you teach through examples;
- the examples mean something to your learners.
- your learners are encouraged to provide examples of their own;
- and you get learners to work with the examples – through activities.

It is for this reason that audio material needs to be integrated into existing course materials such as study guides and text books in order to complement each other and offer distance learners effective and maximum learning support. This therefore makes it imperative for the course designer to design and integrate audio material into the existing print material in such a manner that the former speaks to the learner. The content of the audio material should be presented in digestible "chunks" and in a conversational manner which may be audible and comprehensible to the learner.

The audio lecture should constantly refer the learner to specific sections of the study guide or text book. At certain intervals the learner should be requested to stop the sound medium, read some paragraphs from the text book or the study guide and perform some given activity before playing it for feedback and further elucidation.

The strategy of integrating audio lectures into study guides and textbooks makes the learner an active participant of learning rather than a passive listener. The learner's participation becomes a reality and educationally meaningful as he/she interacts with (and shuttles between) print and the sound media, concurrently.

The integration of sound into existing print media textbook and study guides practically engages the learner's senses of hearing, seeing and touching. Thus the learner is involved in activities at all levels of learning cognitive, affective and psycho-motor. It makes the learner not only read or listen but experience the richness of the world around him/her and reconstruct his/her own meaning of it. The integration of sound also helps

the distance learner to acquire effective study habits such as constant reading, listening, drill and practice. This approach makes learning more learner-centred and interactive.

The approach provides some inter-personal relationship between the lecturer and the learner. The expressing of empathy and guidance through human voice; something which cannot be achieved through text might be a real source of motivation and encouragement to a distance learner. This strategy of instruction where the tutor relies on the human voice is based on the fact that communication is best achieved through the medium of sound. Thus audio material which is produced with skill, competency and insight into the needs of the target group could be a very useful instructional tool in print-based ODL programmes. To borrow the words of Curzon (1990: 311) "as mediating in students, assisting students to achieve understanding, as a component of a teaching situation requiring a combination of instructional techniques, their value is beyond doubt".

Techniques for extracting information from audio material

One important reason for academic support through the application of audio material in print-based ODL programmes is to facilitate learning by boosting retention of what students learn. In this regard, to enable distance learners to gain more from listening to an audio lecture, the course designer should give the student some guides on how to use extracts of information from the audio material. In the words of Galvin (1988: 4), "the listening process starts with our senses, primarily our sense of hearing and our sense of sight. We can think of hearing as the physical ability to pick up sound waves through our ears or our biological auditory system".

There are many people who take listening abilities for granted, but in truth listening is not as simple as we may view it. It is for this reason that some basic skills in listening are crucial for extracting information from audio materials. The basic techniques in listening to extract information from audio material are briefly discussed here.

◆ Familiarising learners with the study package

The listener should first browse or skim the text book on which the audio lecture is based, then listen casually to the audio medium to be

familiar with its contents before re-listening to take down notes. Then the student should read the texts again to consolidate the information received. Thus in an integrated study package, the learner must shuttle between listening and reading (and vice-versa).

♦ *Paying attention*

The listener to audio cassette lectures must pay attention by focussing on the content. Without attention and interest, the whole exercise would be fruitless or a mere entertainment. Listening without attention, therefore, defeats the educational purpose of the medium.

♦ *Full concentration*

A very high degree of concentration is required from the listener. During the period of listening to audio media, all forms of distraction and interruption in the immediate environment should be avoided. The listener's mind should not wander about.

Listening at a time of higher level of concentration would allow the learner time to reflect on and relate the contents of the cassette to his/her own experiences in order to come out with a more informed opinion on the topic under discussion. Listening to an academic lecture is not a passive act because learners need to concentrate on what is said so that they can process the information into their notes. Indeed to achieve retention or auditory memory, the listener must have absolute concentration on what he/she listens to.

♦ *Staying active and listening meaningfully*

A listener to an audio cassette lecture should be active in listening. Active listening would keep the mind on the contents of the audio cassette and make the whole exercise meaningful. Active and meaningful listening requires the listener to be fully immersed in the lecture. This would enable the listener to recognise, classify and discriminate concepts, reflect on them and gain understanding of what is being heard.

♦ *Relax and be patient*

The listener should relax and be a patient listener to the contents of the

cassette. This would enable him/her to follow the salient points and issues discussed on the cassette, then re-state, paraphrase or summarise them.

Challenges to auditory media as instructional devices in ODL

Even though there are several advantages to using audio media with ODL programmes, there are also some challenges which face the ODL materials designer. An auditory medium of instruction ~in ODL programmes faces competition from new technologies, particularly the computer and its online programmes. The proliferation of these new high technologies make many urban-based ODL practitioners overlook the importance of auditory media, particularly CDs and audio cassettes. There are others who think it would very expensive for an ODL institution such as UNISA to include radio broadcast in its mode of delivery.

The preparation of audio material for teaching and learning purposes could be cumbersome and labourious. Getting an audio material designed and packaged takes a lot of time because of the many processes it may pass through. These many processes may require rare type of skills in script writing, editing, trial and packaging. Many lecturers also do not want to give their intellectual property for their institutions to sell to students without personal financial gain. Since institutions do not want to pay lecturers for producing audio materials, most of them are reluctant to spend additional time on that.

CONCLUSIONS The argument in this paper is that many higher education institutions that offer print-based ODL programmes do not give their learners adequate academic support to enable them to cope with their distance studies. In the light of this, the paper has stressed the importance and the necessity of auditory media as part of a total study package to offer academic support to print-based ODL students. It is the author's contention that since a single medium – print – cannot offer adequate academic support for distance students, there is an urgent need to integrate auditory media into print in order to realise the advantages of both. The paper concludes that a well-designed audio medium would be able to add value to learning in print-based ODL programmes.

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