

Introduction to Establishing a Hybrid Learning Course  
An Instructional Module, via an Online, Interactive PDF Format  
for Vietnamese Teachers of English at CEFALT<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Implementing an open-door policy in 1986 to actively integrate into the region and the world and create a favorable investment environment for foreign investors, Viet Nam has attracted more and more foreign companies to invest in its country. English has then reemerged as the main foreign language in the whole society. Following the open-door policy, the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo in 1995 enabled American companies to invest in Viet Nam. These events boosted the explosive growth of the English language movement in the South during the 1990s. Years later, it has spread throughout the country.

On December 16, 2008, thousands of people rushed to the Center for Foreign Affairs and Language Training (CEFALT) in Ho Chi Minh city, Viet Nam, to register for English courses; however, CEFALT could only offer 500 seats for all levels from basic to advanced (VietNamNet Bridge, 2008). There were nearly five thousand people taking three-month English courses in the second term of 2009 at CEFALT. However, about 26.66% of them often missed one-third of the class meetings and many were unable to attend class on time. As the learners at CEFALT are non-traditional adult learners, they have to juggle jobs, family and these courses. Performing business obligations, taking care of children, or working overtime are usually the reasons for their missing class or being late for class.

The social demand for learning the English language may continue to increase along with the developmental pace of Viet Nam. Nonetheless, learners' missing class meetings and usually being late for class may still exist if CEFALT, as well as, other foreign language centers or organizations do not have more convenient and accessible learning modes for them. In addition, the space limitation continues forcing CEFALT to refuse a great number of potential adult learners. This literature review focuses on specific characteristics of non-traditional adult learners, the impact of information communication technology in education, the disadvantages of

wholly online learning, the benefits of hybrid learning, issues and challenges dealing with hybrid learning and possible solutions, a technology infrastructure for hybrid learning and the benefits of Ning, and the benefits of educational media and the portable document format (PDF).

Reviewing the existing literature may serve as the foundation of knowledge, supporting the idea of designing a hybrid delivery format for Vietnamese teachers at CEFALT.

### Literature Review

#### *Specific characteristics of non-traditional adult learners*

Rapid changes in the societal and work environments have placed people to new challenges which require them to pursue continuous learning. In this learning setting, learners are non-traditional adult learners with “diverse backgrounds, occupations and time constraints” (Sitter et al., 2009, p. 40). Eastmond (1998) noted that they pursue the education for “career development, job security, upward mobility, re-careering, and other professional and personal reasons” (p. 33). In addition, they are over twenty-five years old, study part-time, work, and live off campus. Leh (2002) observed that many of the learners were exhausted and hungry in class because they went there straight from their workplace. At times, they had to leave class early due to family or other obligations. Hence, a traditional face-to-face environment may not be ideal for non-traditional adult learners. Faliia (2007) pointed out that they are motivated in class to acquire the new learning provided that it could support their careers and professional positions. Furthermore, non-traditional adult learners tend to prefer sharing their life experiences to the class. Therefore, “if we’re going to be competitive, we need to change our curriculum so that it embraces the development and use of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. We need to move away from the traditional classroom and into an environment where the students are at the center of the stage” (as cited in Riedel, 2009, p. 1).

*Impact of information communication technology in education*

Beldarrain (2006) reiterated that the continuous advancement of technology will continue to create an opportunity for distance educators to create new learning environments by integrating new tools into the instruction, in which learners will be prepared for being life-long learners. Information and communication technology (ICT) has proved to be a great tool in helping create a new learning environment in which learners' autonomy, creativity, problem-solving skills, and team work are nurtured. Kwache (2007) further remarked that ICT has been a means for educators to deem the learners' individual needs.

Over the last decade, the significant spread of the Internet and computers to homes and educational settings has steadily and remarkably boosted the growth of online language learning (Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006). The use of modern technology and the computer has greatly contributed to the expansion of the physical setting for teaching and learning beyond the traditional classroom, and even the school (Ng, Yeung, & Hon, 2006). Eventually, the benefits of the Internet and network technologies, in terms of geographical and time limitation, have been able to challenge and overtake face-to-face learning environments (EL Mansour & Mupinga, 2007).

*Disadvantages of wholly online learning*

Existing research has indicated that online learning environments have offered some advantages including the flexibility of time and the comfortable pace of study for learners (Ng, Yeung & Hon, 2006). This could reveal the fact that online learners have more autonomy and more responsibilities are required on the part of learners in the learning process. Andrade and Bunker (2009) pointed out that, "central to the ideas of autonomy is freedom of choice – learners choose what, where, and how to learn" (p. 49). In regard to autonomy, Januin (2007) found that many Malaysian learners did not have autonomy or full autonomy in their learning and

recognized that the concept of autonomy might be unfamiliar to them because it originated from the Western culture. Noticeably, due to greater responsibility required on the learners, an important concern among educators is that sole-online learning may not be suitable for all learners. Ng, Yeung and Hon (2006) noted that online learning has had some limitations which may have negative impacts on learners. For example, the lack of face-to-face interactions may discourage some learners from participating into the online discussions or even from completing their assignments. Olapiriyakul and Scher (2006) added that dependent or less self-regulated learners tend to get lost during the course if they do not meet with their instructor when the instruction and encouragement are delivered to them. Hence, Ng, Yeung and Hon (2006) recommended that "...instead of using a purely online teaching mode..., 30% of the course would be taught in a face-to-face classroom" (p. 224).

#### *Benefits of hybrid learning*

Hybrid learning is conceptually a blended mode of instructions combining "face-to-face learning and distance learning by incorporating technology to facilitate the learning process" (Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006, p. 288). Existing research has indicated that many institutions have adopted a hybrid learning mode to reduce the space limitation and increase the student-instructor face-to-face contact in distance learning environments. Instruction, Curricular and Advising Committee from Rutgers University Senate (2009) while writing reports and making recommendations on hybrid courses, remarked that hybrid courses establish a better and more flexible learning condition for the learners with time constraints, as well as, for schools seeking a solution to the limitation of parking and classroom space.

As for the learners, they may benefit much from hybrid courses because hybrid courses comprise both the convenience offered by online courses and the existence of the traditional face-to-face interactions (Reasons, Valadares, & Slavkin, 2005; Rutgers University Senate,

2009). Consequently, learners can decide a learning condition that best fit their situation (Leh, 2002). In addition, Tabor (2007) observed that there would be less travel time for commuting learners because of fewer traditional face-to-face class meetings in hybrid learning than in a purely face-to-face learning environment, which is an attractive alternative for non-traditional adult learners or working learners. If the hybrid learning model is applied in an innovative way, an increase in student learning outcomes and a reduction of instructional delivery costs could be reached (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004). Instruction, Curricular and Advising Committee from Rutgers University Senate (2009) reiterated that if hybrid courses are well designed and implemented, they will greatly foster the interaction between instructor and student. Moreover, the interaction and collaboration among learners will be facilitated more effectively in a hybrid course than in a traditional face-to-face learning format.

In reality, hybrid learning has already proven to be a beneficial learning mode not only in terms of financial outcomes, but also as a new learning experience for students (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Banyas (n.d.) noted that:

Hybrid courses are becoming popular in many nations around the world, especially in regions where accessibility to a traditional classroom is limited. American institutions such as the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), the University of Central Florida, Maricopa Community Colleges, the University of Colorado, George Mason University, Ohio State University and Arizona University have all devoted significant resources to researching and developing hybrid courses (The Hybrid Model section, ¶5).

Another example is that the University of Central Florida chose a hybrid delivery mode to reduce the need of renting extra space and as a result, it offered 100 hybrid courses meeting half of the time in face-to-face classrooms and the other half online.

Olapiriyakul and Scher (2006) remarked that learners preferred the hybrid learning mode to the traditional face-to-face learning mode because the hybrid learning mode could provide them with a more effective learning experience. These two researchers expressed that integrating technology into the instruction enhanced learners' creativity and expression through the course discussions and activities. Moreover, a stronger sense of community is fostered in hybrid learning than either in traditional or wholly online settings (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). In order to attract adult learners to hybrid learning, Eastmond (1998) suggested that some of the elements should be included in a hybrid learning environment as follows:

...asynchronicity (accessing the course as it fit their schedule), group support (feeling camaraderie in their new learning experience), reflection, control (feeling independent about studying), interactivity (giving and receiving feedback about online messages), text (engaging in intensive reading and writing activities), and democracy (feeling that each participant had equitable "air time")...(p. 37).

*Issues and challenges dealing with hybrid learning and possible solutions*

New instructional delivery models have created a learning setting in which learners could acquire skills and knowledge meeting the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; nonetheless, it has posed diverse challenges for educators and institutions to move away from a traditional delivery method and into a new delivery format. As a matter of fact, combining face-to-face and online instruction into a hybrid learning course has, to some extent, become a challenge to many teachers (Beldarrain, 2006). Reynard (2007) pointed out that there has been a challenge for teachers to think through the pedagogical implications of both methods and to develop new designs for instruction and course delivery that maximize the dual environments. "Rethinking Course Design", "Adopting a New Approach to Teaching", "Managing the Dual Learning Environment", and "Preparing Students" to work in a hybrid format are examples of challenges

relating to creating hybrid learning settings (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009). Cheng and Myles (2003) also noted that transferring a traditional face-to-face course to an online format without changing high instructional standards and integrity has challenged teachers both technically and pedagogically. "...many teachers have a fear of technology and often see a move to hybrid or online learning as a move to replace them as teachers and as a way to diminish the learning experience for students... Additionally, teachers can feel overwhelmed in having too many student responses to read through and not really sure what to do with those responses or how to integrate them into the learning experience..." (Reynard, 2007, p. 1).

The root of the aforementioned challenges may come from the nature of hybrid learning environments which comprise both online and face-to-face class meetings. Additional scheduling and communication challenges are found to become obvious in hybrid learning settings. In regard to these challenges, instructors must know how to manage the dual learning environment so they do not overload themselves and their students; additionally, they need to learn how to facilitate online discussions and activities in class and how to assess learners in the new learning environment (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009). Another aspect of the issue is that some instructors do not make any changes to the course' objectives though they are in a hybrid learning model; rather, they just add the new features on their traditional courses (Kelata, Garnham, & Aycock, 2005). Hence, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2009) suggested that instructors must redesign the course and change the learning environment to a more learner-centered.

It is quite certain that moving away from traditional face-to-face environment and into hybrid learning has challenged many teachers. In fact, redesigning the course for the first time has challenged most teachers. Kaleta, Garnham, and Aycock (2005) reiterated that course redesign requires a substantial time commitment from the course designers. Beldarrain (2006)

added that “revising course design and delivery structures in hybrid learning is a time-consuming and costly endeavor” (p. 145). Especially in the conversion stage, teachers have to spend more time on relearning how to keep learners actively engaged and connected in a hybrid learning format (Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal, 2004). Consequently, Hensley (2005) found that faculty members have been concerned that the extra workload caused by course preparation and delivery may not accompany a pay raise and also suggested that this financial issue should be seriously considered by school administrators. Sharing similar viewpoints, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2009) stated that the initial preparation for a hybrid course or the conversion phase is far more labor-intensive than the preparation for a face-to-face course; however, they further reiterated that the materials could be reused.

In response to most of the issues and challenges to hybrid learning, Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2004) recognized that support from instructional developers and technologists may have a significant impact on successful course redesigns. It would be invaluable for novice online teachers to have templates for online course design so they can restructure the course content in a less challenging manner (Cheng & Myles, 2003). Another type of support is professional development which can be established to assist teachers in redesigning instruction and updating their teaching methods. With this, teachers will be helped to maximize their students’ learning potential. With regard to the professional development, Reynard (2007) recommended that more training should be placed on methodology than technology. Simultaneously, helping teachers to adapt their perspective and role to a new instructional delivery environment is of great importance to becoming an effective online instructor (Sugar, Martindale & Crawley, 2007).

*Technology infrastructure for hybrid learning and benefits of Ning*

Among the technology components required for facilitating learning in a hybrid format, a technology infrastructure is the backbone of the entire learning systems (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Olapiriyakul and Scher (2006) mentioned that establishing network infrastructure for hybrid learning requires crucial considerations in accessibility and security of the network systems. The researchers added that the Internet has been widely utilized as a teaching platform. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) maintained that the asynchronous Internet communication technology is used to enhance independent and collaborative learning experience. “Internet discussion forums can provide a permanent record and expand time; as such, discussions are often more thoughtful, reasoned, and supported by evidential sources” (as cited in Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 99). Olapiriyakul and Scher (2006) added that the asynchronous communication technology is more widely used than the synchronous one because it is more convenient for learners. Moreover, it is easier for both instructors and learners to control their tasks.

Beldarrain (2006) mentioned that with support of social software, individuals could collaborate with each other via the Internet. This social networking has been made it possible and conceptually, it “emphasizes collaborative user-to-user interaction.” In addition, “the goal of social networking is to provide a community-based website where users can share personal experiences and construct their knowledge” (as cited in Chou and Chen, 2008, p. 574).

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Social Network Sites: A Definition section, ¶1). Educause Learning Initiative (2008) recommended the

instructors utilize social software to “facilitate a strong sense of community” for “the creation of new knowledge and collective intelligence” (¶10). In addition, Rovai (2002) stressed that learners are likely to learn better when they gain stronger sense of community. A community is imperative to “engender commitment and ensure students progressively move through the phases of critical inquiry....Critical thinking moves through discernable phases of a triggering event, exploration, integration and application...” (as cited in Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p. 99). Reynard (2008) remarked that learners will learn better when they realize the importance of their mutual connections in the learning process.

In practice, Beldarrain (2006) found that Imeem™, a social networking software, has been utilized and claimed to “completely encrypted and secure” through by-invitation-only access. Hence, educators can utilize Imeem™ by logging in and creating a URL and password for their classes. For learners, they just follow the link without having to download any application. Imeem™ is quite similar to Ning which is also a social network site; however, Ning may be more powerful than Imeem™. Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>) owns more features including forums, members, videos, photos, blogs, events, groups, activities, and chat (<http://about.ning.com/product.php>). Ning is a free technology program and it does not require local server infrastructure, which are the first two convincing points to most educators. In “A Case Study in Implementing Social Networking for Distance Learning,” Hoffman (2009) noted that “Ning has been a positive asset in the course by providing a formal structure for required discussions, for helping students as they work on collaborative projects, and for the informal comments and messages that helped personalize student interactions” (p. 96). Furthermore, Ning has been proven to be amongst “the social networking potentials for distance learning” (p. 98). With the above positive attributes, Ning can be used as a backbone or technology infrastructure of a hybrid delivery mode.

*Benefits of educational media and the portable document format (PDF)*

Though print media has been the standard reference and learning tool for students, it is not cost-effective and not easy to be updated because of its static feature. In contrast, educational media is more dynamic, easily customizable, and eco-friendly. Animations, interactivity, and visual design can be applied to educational media. In addition, it can be disseminated freely and quickly through the Internet. Huang (2005) further stressed that if well-designed, educational media can greatly contribute to stimulating learners and making the learning process more active and engaging. In terms of interactivity, Upton and Cooper (2006) noted that in an online learning setting, “participation is elicited by interactivity;” therefore, it is considered as “a key element in engaging the student with the material” (p. 224). If the material is presented in an interactive manner, it will make the learning become memorable (Balci, Gilley, Adams, Tunar & Barnette, n.d.)

Horan and Lavelle (2003) mentioned that interactive features such as “active links within the document, questions and quizzes” can be found in PDF files. In addition, learners can open a PDF directly or download it from the web provided that their computers have already had a free Adobe Acrobat Reader. Rautiainen (2009) underlined that PDF is “an almost universally supported file format... PDF files are supported on almost all platforms, from common general purpose operating systems and Web browsers to more exotic platforms, such as mobile phones and printers” (p. 33). Furthermore, if a PDF file has a very visually-rich content, there will be no barriers in communicating and exchanging it electronically (Cheng, 2002).

## Conclusion

The development policy of the country has required its citizens to upgrade themselves in coping with new challenges in the society. Attracting foreign partners to invest in the country has urged more and more Vietnamese adults to improve their knowledge of foreign languages in which English is considered as a common foreign language in the country and particularly at CEFALT. As learners at CEFALT are non-traditional adult learners, most of them find it challenging to physically be in class on time and regularly. Hence, it is essential to have a learning environment which is more convenient and accessible for them. Existing research has indicated that the hybrid learning model may offer the best features of face-to-face and online instruction. “The hybrid is an art that *reveals* art: going hybrid delivers an immediate apprehension of all that is overdetermined, stultifying, and oppressive in face-to-face learning, yet as well, all that is valuable about it — the spontaneity and empathy that can lend itself to a sense of shared undertaking in the classroom itself” (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009, ¶ 6). Many researchers held the view that hybrid learning would be a more appropriate learning mode for most non-traditional adult learners. However, in order to successfully create and teach in a hybrid learning setting, all the stakeholders of a hybrid learning setting, including teachers, students, and administrators, should be well-prepared for it.

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CEFALT<sup>1</sup>: Center for Foreign Affairs and Language Training in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam. CEFALT was founded by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on December 13, 1997. CEFALT offers diverse training programs in international relations and foreign languages (English and Chinese) to government officials and all who demand in the city and the country. Address: 87 Tran Quoc Thao Street, District 3, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam  
Website: [http://www.cefalt.edu.vn/default\\_en.asp](http://www.cefalt.edu.vn/default_en.asp)