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# E-Language Learning and Teaching in Australia

## A Case Study

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**Abstract:** *This article aims to discuss the status quo of e-language learning and teaching in Australia using the Griffith University Chinese program offered through Open Universities Australia (OUA) as a case study. It first points out the indispensability of educational technology for language learning, especially, for Distance Language Education (DLE), by establishing the importance of interaction to communicative language learning. Following a review of the current state of DLE, and an introduction of OUA, this article focuses on the course design of the Chinese program to exemplify how interaction has been engendered in online language learning with the support of advanced educational technologies. This discussion also leads to some recommendations for future online language course design.*

**Keywords:** e-language learning, distance language learners, interaction, online assessment, task design

### 1. Introduction

It has been a gospel for second language (L2) professionals that interaction is an integral part of a communicative language learning process, and that interaction is both a goal and means of language learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Long, 1996; Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Gass, 2003). However, interaction has been sadly missing or poorly provided in Distance Language Education (DLE), mainly due to the separation of physical face-to-face interaction from language learning by the geographical distance between the learner and the education provider. Thus, in a DLE context, effective interaction is heavily depended on the capabilities of educational technology.

With this understanding of the relationship between distance language learning and technology, this paper is going to examine the provision of interaction in DLE today, using the Griffith University Mandarin courses offered via the Open Universities Australia as a case study.

### 2. The Current State of Distance Language Education (DLE)

In contrast to other disciplines in distance education, systematic distance *language* programs were not developed until late 1980s and early 1990s, when the advances

in educational technology promised support for the mastery of language skills such as listening and speaking skills. For example, the Open University founded in 1969 in the UK did not start its language teaching until 1994, after 25 years of experience in the provision of distance education in many other academic areas (Stevens, 1995, p. 12). Since then, it has been regarded as the “largest modern foreign language learning provider” in the UK (Kötter, Shield, & Stevens, 1999, p. 55). Another example is the Open Learning Chinese program at Griffith University, which was developed in 1993.

Several studies in DLE have reported the relatively ‘low-tech’ nature of their programs throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The remarks by Hampel & Hauck (2004, p. 66) neatly summarizes the picture: until 2002, “Open University language students depended primarily on traditional distance-learning methods of delivery such as print material, video tapes, audio cassettes, and occasional face-to-face tutorials ...”. Similar delivery mode also applied to the Griffith University Open Learning Chinese Program before 2010. Obviously such asynchronous delivery mode is not adequate to facilitate interactive and communicative language learning. Nor can it satisfy the needs of learners today.

Today’s distance language learners are composed of both “Digital Natives” and “Digital Immigrants”

. Defined by Prensky (2001, p.1), “Digital Natives” are the new generation who have grown up with digital technologies and are “all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet, while “Digital Immigrants” who did not grow up using digital technologies, have to “learn to adapt to their environment” , and “always retain, to some degree, their “accent,” that is, “their foot in the past” (Prensky, 2001, p. 2). Neither Digital Natives nor Digital Immigrants would be satisfied with self-learning in an isolated low-tech environment as distance learners were 30 years ago. Instead, they need more dynamic and timely interaction and collaboration with their teachers and peers. Although increasingly recognized in the distance education literature in the 21st century (see Dreyer, Bamgeni, & Nel, 2005; Kennedy & Duff, 2004; Miwa & Wang, 2011; Chen & Wang, 2008) , such a need has not been adequately met in DLE.

### **3. Open Universities Australia and the Griffith University Distance Chinese Program**

#### **3.1. Open Universities Australia**

It was amid the widespread international enthusiasm for open and distance education in the early 1990s that Open Universities Australia was founded in 1993, with the aim to provide equal access for students across Australia, especially in regional and rural areas. As its name suggests, OUA is a consortium of Australian tertiary institutions and professional associations, consisting of 18 course providers (universities and community colleges) and 7 shareholder universities - Monash University, The Australian National University, Curtin University of Technology, Griffith University, Macquarie University, RMIT University and the University of South Australia (see Figure 1). OUA provides access to over 1,000 courses and 90 qualifications including both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Student enrolment continues to grow each year and in 2011, reached 167,000.00 , up 28 per cent from 2010 (OUA Annual Report, 2011).



*Figure 1. Course providers for Open Universities Australia (OUA Annual Report, 2010)*

#### **3.2 The Griffith University Distance Chinese Program**

As an OUA foundation and shareholder university, Griffith University has been offering a large number of courses through OUA since 1993, and the Chinese program is one of them. Since 2010, a comprehensive redevelopment of the Chinese courses has taken place to meet the needs of learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The new Chinese program, consisting of three levels from the beginner to the advanced level, is now offered in a complete online mode featuring weekly synchronous online lectures and tutorials, online office hours (online consultation outside the class), and synchronous and asynchronous online assessments.

Students in this program are geographically dispersed, with the majority from different states in Australia and some even from other countries. They are mostly adult learners from a diverse background and different age groups. They enrol in the OUA courses mainly for its self study mode which offers them the flexibility of studying anytime and anywhere. When designing an on-line language course, a crucial issue confronting us was what kinds of interaction and collaboration we should engender in the courses that will both meet the needs of language students and maximize the potential of today’s educational technology?

**3.2.1. Interactions engendered in the online Chinese program.** Upon a careful evaluation of the potentials of educational technologies available to us and the needs of language learners today, our Chinese program was redesigned to offer a variety of interactions and collaboration that are technologically affordable and pedagogically crucial to learning a language at a distance. In terms of mode of learning, our program engenders both synchronous and asynchronous interaction between and among learners, between the learner and the teacher, between learners and native speakers and between learners and content. In

terms of language skill training, we provide students with listening and reading interaction with materials tailored for our students, synchronous speaking interaction between the teacher and the learner and between learners, writing interaction both synchronously and asynchronously between the teacher and the learner and among learners, and intercultural communication between learners and native speakers. Table 1 summarizes the types of interaction in developing language skills and the supporting tools made available to our students.

Table 1. Online interactions engendered in the Chinese program at Griffith University

| Skills                             | Tools used                         | Types of interaction   | Mode  | Learning theories                         |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Listening                          | Online quiz                        | Between learners and content as in ongoing weekly listening comprehension quizzes.   | Asynchronous; individual                    | reflection                                |
| Speaking                           | Wimba classroom; Wimba voice board | Between the learners in completing speaking assignment or oral test;<br>Between the teacher and the learners in online lectures and oral test; | Synchronous; group or paired                | Collaboration, interaction and reflection |
| Reading                            | Online quiz                        | Between the learners and content as in ongoing weekly reading comprehension quizzes.   | Asynchronous; individual                    | reflection                                |
| Writing                            | Wiki                               | Collaborative group writing assignments  | Asynchronous; group, or paired; synchronous | collaboration and interaction             |
| Intercultural communication skills | Wimba classroom                    | Between the learners and native speaker in online language exchange programs.  | Synchronous; paired                         | collaboration and interaction             |

To support the interactions mentioned above, a variety of online tools have been employed in the program. The online Chinese program uses the Blackboard Academic suite as its learning management system, which integrates a range of online tools to support learning. This means that students only need to log into the Blackboard once to access their course site and the learning tools.

**3.2.2. The Wimba classroom.** Specifically designed for education, the Wimba classroom supports live interaction between the geographically separated teacher and students through a range of videoconferencing and data sharing tools (see Figure 2). In addition to seeing and hearing one another in the Wimba classroom, students and teachers can also interact with one another through the text chat, eboard and other sharing functions in the

online classroom. (for more information on the Wimba classroom , see [http://www.wimba.com/solutions/higher-education/wimba\\_classroom\\_for\\_higher\\_education/](http://www.wimba.com/solutions/higher-education/wimba_classroom_for_higher_education/)).

The Wimba classroom is the most frequently used tool in this program for conducting synchronous online lectures, office hours, and various assessments. The

online lectures and assessments can be recorded using the inbuilt archiving feature in Wimba. Multiple Wimba classrooms have been created for different learning purposes: lecture rooms for content delivery, tutorial rooms for small group interaction, homework rooms for weekly speaking practice, recording rooms for the speaking assignments, and oral and written test rooms (see Figure 3).

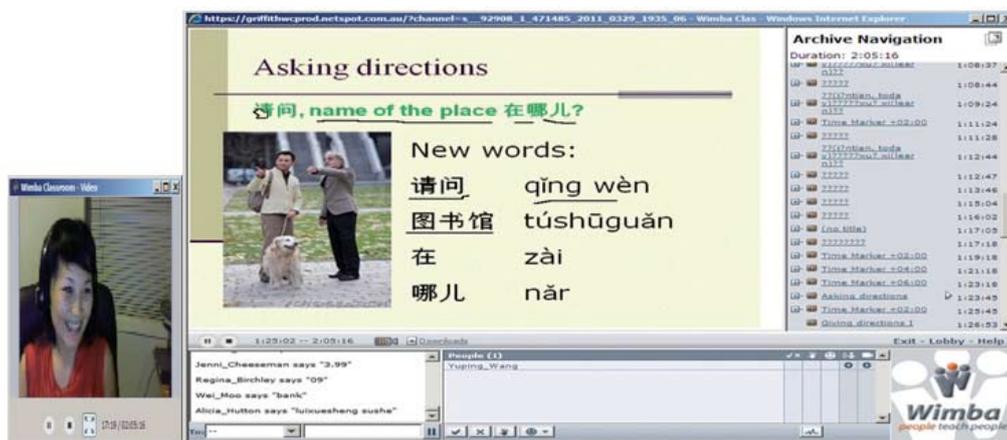


Figure 2. The Wimba Classroom features

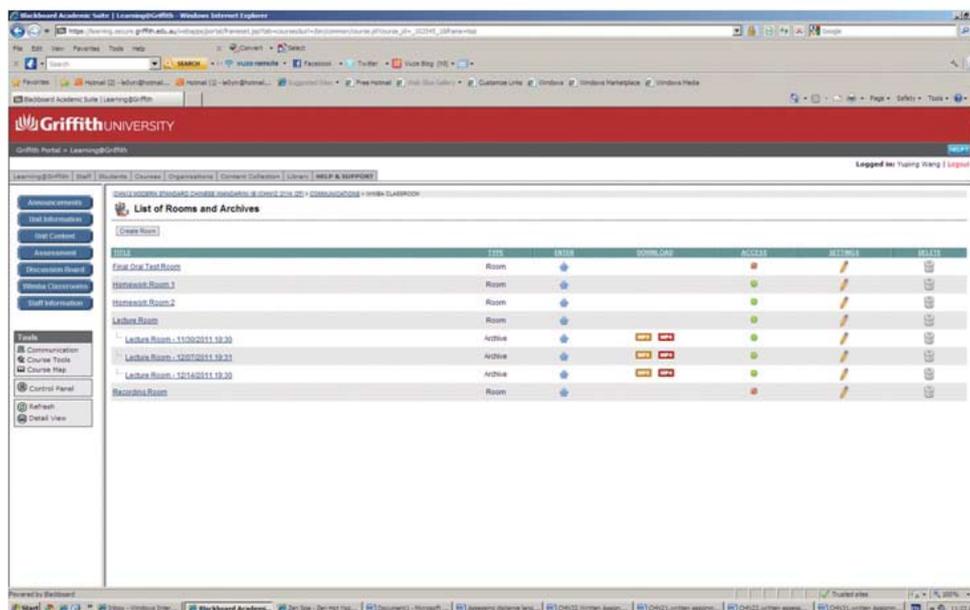


Figure 3. Wimba classrooms created for each course

**3.2.3. The Wiki.** A Wiki is a website which allows multi-users to collaboratively create and modify dynamic content through a web browser. Seamlessly integrated into the Blackboard suite at Griffith University, Wikis have been used in the Chinese program mostly for the written assignments that provide students with an op-

portunity to interact and collaborate with one another to improve their writing skills. Students worked in pairs or groups to co-construct a Wiki-based website exploring certain aspects of the Chinese culture or language, or co-designing editions of a Chinese newspaper.



Figure 4. An example of a submitted group Wiki page

3.2.4. **The online quiz tool.** Test Manager has been used in the Chinese program to create online reading and listening quizzes to help with the acquisition of listening and reading skills. Students are required to complete one

quiz each week as an ongoing measure to interact with the learning contents. Figure 5 exemplifies the weekly quizzes created via Test Manager.

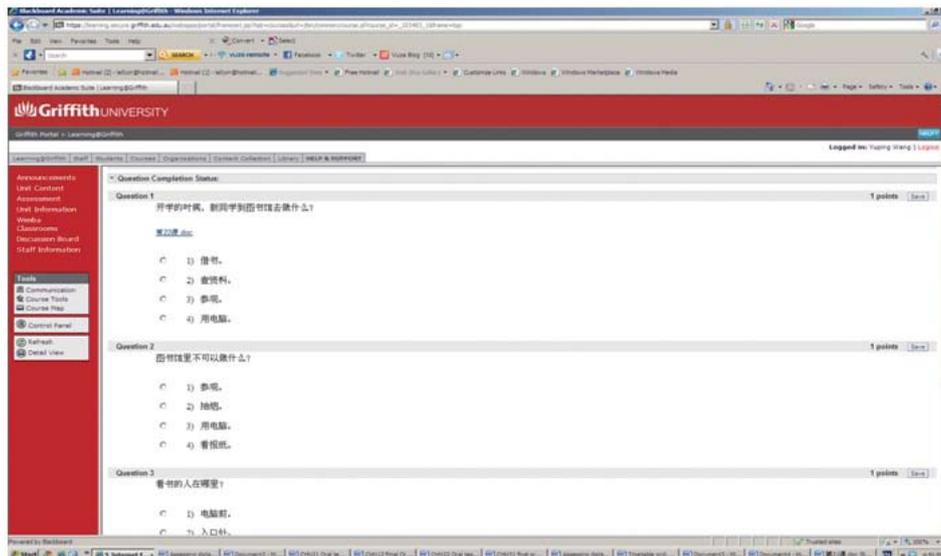


Figure 5. Listening quizzes

#### 4. The Implications for Future Online Language Course Design

The above discussed course design has been implemented since the beginning of 2011. The feedback from students and course designer's evaluation direct

us to a number of issues that should be taken into consideration in future e-language course design.

First of all, online language courses should be designed in accordance with established learning theories and learners' needs, taking full advantage of the current

capabilities of online educational technologies. In the case of the Griffith University online Chinese program, we have endeavoured to engage students with a variety of interactions and collaboration, the fundamental elements in modern language education, through maximising the potential of online tools available to us.

Secondly, the balance between synchronous interaction and self-learning should receive adequate attention. Synchronous interaction is crucial to language learning but too much such interaction could do a disservice to the flexibility of distance education as most distance learners work full time and find it hard to be synchronously online. This is why we only offer a two hour synchronous lecture per week for the beginner's level of the Mandarin courses and a one hour synchronous tutorial per week for the advanced level courses.

Thirdly, care should be exercised when choosing and using online tools for supporting interaction. Tools should be seamlessly integrated into the online course environment, and should be introduced progressively and used regularly. Different tools should be used for supporting different types of interaction and a combination of tools should be adopted to complement one another in order to better support learning (Chao, Hung & Chen, 2012). However, the use of too many tools in a course at the same time should be avoided as this will increase students' work load and pressure, and may have an adverse effect on their learning and motivation to learn. In the Chinese program, the Wiki and Wimba classroom are the principal tools and are used throughout a course. We only introduced two new tools (i.e., the quiz tool and the Wimba Voice Board) to advanced courses once students have become competent users of the Wiki and Wimba classroom.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In the discussion of the status quo of e-language learning and teaching in Australia using the Griffith University Chinese program as a case study, this article has demonstrated how and what kinds of interaction can be supported in today's online language learning. Along with the ever increasing capacities of technology, new pedagogical possibilities will always emerge. What will remain crucial though is the necessity to constantly assess and meet the needs of the learner through the use of innovative technology.

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