

The Role of the Tutors in the Teaching of Online English for Business Programmes in South Africa: A Case Study

Bernard Nchindila

University of South Africa
Department of English Studies
Pretoria 0003, South Africa
nchinbm@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

In the business world where effective communication is most paramount, the role of the tutor in ensuring delivery of quality training is crucial. In the case of workplace training, learners often do not have time to attend face-to-face classes to acquire the needed skills outside working hours. Many of them end up registering for distance training courses. To enhance their chances of success, they supplement their learning approaches with online learning methods. Because this mode of learning is quite new to many in South Africa, they face several challenges which sometimes overwhelm them. Tutors therefore carry a heavy responsibility to help learners by making sure that they understand the needs of their students, that they plan the training programmes well, and that they implement and evaluate the programmes properly.

In this article, the writer looks at the role of the tutors in an online programme on English Business Communication in South Africa, using a process-writing approach which was well intended but failed to live up to its expectations. Suggestions for better practice are finally offered.

Keywords: English mentoring, Internet Communication, African learners

Introduction

Workplace learning has been suggested as an appropriate tool for work skills development and much has been said regarding the importance of skills development, particularly in the South African context. At the South African Government level, different approaches have been prescribed in various South African Government papers such as the *Learnership Act of 1998* and the *National Skills Development Strategy of 2001* to help South African nationals to access employment and while in employment perform their work to acceptable levels. Since the Government efforts are also intended for those who are already employed and most of these are adults who have gone past the normal secondary school going age, they can only be assisted in their workplace as adult learners.

At the time of the research, South Africa was being run by a black government that was pursuing a policy of black empowerment in which black people were preferred to their white counterparts in their efforts to acquire the necessary skills to perform satisfactorily in industry. This policy was termed as Affirmative Action, and the understanding was that the whites had already benefited during the apartheid regime when black people were segregated. There were therefore more black learners than white learners on this programme. The learners were male and female adults from the South African Department of Labour and they were black and white speakers of English as a second language. The tutors were from SACHED, Witwatersrand University and the University of South Africa, and consisted of two Indians who withdrew in the early stages of the programme, two black Africans, and ten whites. The programme was known as Business Communication Programme (BCP) and was sponsored by the European Union as a contribution to the skills development in South Africa. Forty-nine learners and 14 mentors were observed in the Business Communication Programme (BCP) for two years from 2003 to 2005.

The Language Issue in South Africa

South Africa comes from a history of the apartheid system of government in which the black people were dominated and discriminated against by the white citizens. After many years of struggle the apartheid rule was brought to an end in 1994, and with the coming of the new government many changes were made to give a chance to the black people who had been deprived of quality education and job opportunities. One of the changes concerned the question of language. While under the apartheid regime the official languages of government were Afrikaans and English, Afrikaans was more prominent than English (Silva 1998). Although after 1994 the constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) advocated the use of eleven official languages, the reality is however affected by the fact that at the national and international level, communication in South Africa takes place in English (Silva 1998) and English "has typically been seen as the language of liberation and black unity" (Gough 1996: xviii). However, although there are some speakers of English as a first language in South Africa, English is a second language to many. To those who used Afrikaans as the only official language during the apartheid era, English is learned as a second language, and to the speakers of the other ten languages, English could be a second or an eleventh language.

Goals of the Business Communication Programme

From the Roadmap for the Business Communication Programme, the training was to be conducted in three phases, namely: Introductory, Intermediate and Advanced. The crucial objective of the BCP was to develop work-based communication skills. This programme was designed to drive a redress and equity process of empowering learners of English as a second language and in particular black women and people with disabilities to advance in the system and to encourage learners to be more effective in the workplace. According to the Department of Labour objectives in implementing the Business Communication Programme (BCP), the staff members who undertook this programme "identified the skills and knowledge that they needed in their Performance Agreements" (p.3). The Business Communication Programme was going to be registered as a short learning programme with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and the University of South Africa would provide all participants whose work demonstrated competence in terms of the outcomes in the relevant unit standards with a Certificate of Competence. The programme was based on a number of Further Education and Training (FET) language unit standards, primary of which is FET-S/21 (2153); National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 5.

Based on this understanding, the following curriculum was designed to meet the needs of the learners. The information contained in the *Service Tender Submission Form* states that the Department of Labour identified the following assumptions underlying the project intervention:

"Staff members who would undertake this programme had identified the skills and knowledge that they needed in their Performance Agreements."

The consortium supported this position arguing that learners who were compelled to take part in a learning programme would regard the programme as their own. The consortium further proposed to use a peer group interactive type of learning for the learners to assess each other and provide constructive feedback. In addition, the consortium proposed a continuous form of assessment through a portfolio of evidence over a period as a way of eliminating the possibility of failing an examination.

"All the learners would begin at the same time and phase."

The consortium however proposed to conduct a needs analysis using a representative focus group and by collecting examples of business communication from the Department of Labour so that the course materials could be modified. The consortium further found it imperative to pre-assess the learners to determine their acquired skills, in terms of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). They also sought to establish competencies by means of a written assessment and a personal interview in order to establish a starting point for tuition and the goal competencies against which the success of the training was going to be measured.

The consortium also proposed to divide participants into mixed-ability groups of ten based on their initial

assessments.

The Department of Labour identified the following risks about the programme:

- Staff depletion within the Department of Labour during the periods of training

The consortium proposed to obviate this possibility by limiting face-to-face training for each phase to 30-40 potential learners at a time. The face-to-face training was further going to be limited to five days for phase 1, and 3 days for phases 2 and 3.

- Staff members who had participated in similar training in the past had not always completed the assessment requirements to attain competence.

The consortium observed that an attrition rate had been built into the programme to address such a risk.

On the strength of these responses to the assumptions and risks, the consortium averred that:

1. All training would be situational and context specific based on the learners' typical daily experiences and involving role-play, decision making, and communicative and personal interaction within realistic circumstances.
2. All training would be co-operative involving learners at different levels of competence as active participants, enabling independent thought and minimising the gap between formal tuition and job functions.
3. Training would be conducted through various media supplemented with remedial tuition by highly qualified language and business writing practitioners. All learners were going to receive professionally produced training manuals and resource materials that would be made available both in hard copy format and on CD-ROM or computer disk.
4. Mentors were identified and would be undergoing specific training in mentorship.

The product of training would be to empower further training to be conducted by the Department of Labour as part of its normal functioning, without undue reliance on an outside agency.

Curriculum

The Introductory level contained the following activities:

- keep a journal
- read Department of Labour materials for understanding of register and style
- make a phone call
- take notes
- negotiate and make a group decision
- write a memo or submission
- write a letter of confirmation
- edit one's own and others' work
- develop a workshop programme
- communicate information by e-mail
- communicate by fax
- analyse job advertisements
- compare CV style
- write own CV
- write a letter of application
- work out the criteria for making an effective oral presentation
- make a presentation
- work out the criteria for listening
- listen with intent

The Intermediate course required learners to:

- plan a project
- conduct a survey
- read legal or technical documents
- summarise important information
- produce a proposal
- conduct meetings (notices, chairing, minutes)
- negotiate and solve problems(objectives) strategies
- consider a proposal
- record negotiation decisions
- produce an action plan
- write a final report
- write an information pamphlet

In the Advanced course learners had to:

- review features of business writing
- compare proposals and reports
- generate a framework for a budget and a proposal
- review report writing (in Department of Labour context)
- review summarising skills
- summarise
- write a report for your own context
- use version numbering for documents
- review presentation skills
- reflect on planning documents
- review editing skills
- edit documents
- write replies to Parliamentary Questions (PQs) (as some workers worked in sections where they were required to write replies to Parliamentary Questions for their superiors)
- make a presentation in the workplace.

The general assumption was that learners would start from Elementary tasks and proceed to the Intermediate and Advanced levels having acquired the lower level skills.

To achieve the required skills, learners were expected to work with a tutor who would have some face-to-face contact with the learners in a classroom/workshop learning situation to help learners pinpoint their particular difficulties in writing and to find solutions which would help them. Learners would further have the opportunity to use the tutor as an online colleague and editor during the programme (Business Communication Programme 2003).

The learners were also expected to submit a portfolio of work for each phase of the programme. The submission of the portfolio file was mandatory as an important part of the assessment that would lead to formal accreditation. At the time, the Business Communication Programme was going to be registered as a short programme (skills programme) with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and the University of South Africa would provide all participants whose work demonstrated competence in terms of the outcomes in the relevant unit standards with a Certificate of Competence.

At the end of the programme, learners were going to be evaluated by evidence that they were competent in writing professional documents prescribed in the curriculum against a full complement of unit standard. The following were the outcome targets:

- 80% of learners were assessed as competent against the full complement of unit standards by the end of the project.
- At least 85% of learners assessed as competent were black.
- At least 54% of learners assessed as competent were female.
- High quality materials were available within the Department of Labour to help sustain communication skills development.
- At least ten people within the Department of Labour were trained as mentors in communication skills.

A model for the development of communication skills training would be piloted and evaluated by the project.

Research Design

Two questionnaires were designed to obtain data from the learners and tutors respectively. The response from the learners was not favourable enough. Because of the huge challenges encountered in running this programme, it was extremely difficult to get co-operation from some participants in answering the questionnaires sent to them in the aftermath. Out of the targeted sixty learners, only six were able to respond. Nevertheless, six of the nine mentors were able to return their answered questionnaires, recording a 66% success rate. This part of the study explores the literature on the role of the tutors in the programme. The literature is supported by the findings captured from the questionnaires. The questions were open ended encouraging participants to express themselves more deeply.

Role of Tutors in the Literature

Goldstein (2004:68) poses questions in an attempt to provide guidelines which teachers of a second language can follow in making written commentary effective:

- (1) What are the attitudes and expectations of the institution towards students;
- (2) What are the attitudes and expectations of the program towards students;
- (3) If there are conflicts between the institutional and programmatic attitudes, who mediates these conflicts and how;
- (4) What are the professed philosophies of the program and its administrators towards what teachers should be commenting on and how;
- (5) What are the range of commenting practices the teachers actual employ;
- (6) What are the entrance and exit requirements for the program and for individual courses within the program;
- (7) How do teachers and students mediate between the above requirements and sound commenting and revision practices when there are conflicts between these requirements and such practices;
- (8) What is the workload for the teacher and the student, that is, what is the average class size and what, if any, are the requirements for number of papers, number of drafts and revisions, and number of words completed per semester.

Studies on teachers' commentary on students' writing indeed go further. Cardinal in this field are those that examine what individual students actually do with teacher commentary and the relationship between teacher commentary and student revision on a general level covering issues such as audience, purpose, logic, content, organisation and development. Some of these studies have found that students vary in

how they use the commentary they receive from their teachers (Chi, 1999; Goldstein and Kohls, 2002; Hyland, 1998 and Hyland, 2000). While some studies show that students find teachers' written commentary useful (Anglada, 1995; Crawford, 1992; Cohen, 1991 and Saito, 1994) there is evidence that students perceive commentary differently as some students find commentary confusing (Arndt, 1993; Chapin and Terdal 1990; Dessner, 1991 and Ferris, 1998). There is also variation in terms of how much students feel they have understood of their teacher's commentary (Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990; Anglada, 1995 and Brice 1995). Other research has shown that sometimes students think they have understood a comment when they have not, and so some teachers' comments have been misconstrued (Goldstein and Kohls, 2002). Students have also reported using teacher written feedback without understanding the reasons behind it (Crawford, 1992 and Hyland, 2000).

Given all of the above research findings, it is clear that the issue of communication between tutors and their learners is key, particularly with regard to effecting commentary in process writing.

What Should be Commented on in Process-writing?

There seems to be no agreement on how much commentary should occur in process-writing. Lehmann (1998) advocates an open approach while other researchers are a bit more cautious in examining the shape of the teachers' commentary, arguing that teachers should concentrate on the weaknesses revealed in the student's writing (Arndt, 1993; Cresswell, 2000 and Muncie, 2000). While on the one hand Lehman recognises the importance of praise for the student's work, Hyland and Hyland (2001) argue that praise comments should be genuinely deserved and not gratuitous.

Other thought provoking issues on the subject of teachers' commentary have been expounded by Goldstein (2004) who asks whether teachers should be asking questions in their comments, telling the students exactly what to do, or showing the students exactly how to make a particular revision and indeed where to put the comments. While Goldstein (2004) recommends writing brief final comments at the end of the learners' work, Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) favour writing comments next to the point being observed arguing that this carries immediacy.

One might also look to the various forms of software such as Creative Technology software (2005) which is said to help teachers produce commentary more quickly and efficiently. It is however important to note that even such types of software can only work well where students have the basic knowledge of grammatical and syntactic terminology to understand what a verb is or what the rule is for subject-verb agreement.

Assessing Portfolios

According to Song and August (2002) portfolio assessment of writing, which makes use of multiple writing samples produced at different times, has been found to be ideally suited to programmes that use a curriculum influenced by the writing process because portfolios can accommodate and even support extensive revision. They can also be used to examine progress over a period of time, and can empower students to take responsibility for their own writing.

Research is rich in information on portfolio assessment (Camp, 1993; Gill, 1993 and Herman and Winters 1994). Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) advocated the use of portfolios for English as a Second Language students because they found them to be especially suitable for non-native English-speaking students claiming that "portfolios provided a broader measure of what students can do, and because they replace the timed writing context, which has long been claimed to be particularly discriminatory against non-native writers" (p.61).

However as much as portfolio assessment promises huge benefits for curriculum and assessment, it also faces challenges. According to Brown and Hudson (1998) five disadvantages of using portfolio assessment can be identified as: the issue of validity, reliability, design decision, logistics and interpretation. These researchers found that portfolio assessments were time-consuming and that the issues of reliability and validity of the assessments remained unresolved in this type of assessment.

Song and August (2002) further posed searching questions such as: how can we ensure that psychometric reliability such as scoring consistency is achieved in the portfolio assessments? How can we achieve scoring fairness? More crucially, the researchers ask how it can be established that portfolios adequately exemplify students' writing abilities so that the decisions made about students are accurate. In response to the questions raised on the issue of assessments, Yancey (1999) argued that scoring consistency can be achieved through negotiations among assessors. Some researchers, notably Huot and Williamson (1997), supported portfolio assessments on the grounds that the fact that the portfolio assessment system resists psychometric standardisation makes it a better assessment instrument. They concluded that reliability and validity in the narrow psychometric sense are undesirable factors in evaluations. However, other researchers, such as Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2002) who have supported portfolio assessments, have conceded that reliability and validity are necessary if this type of assessment is to replace the other types because psychometric data tends to be more convincing to decision makers. Williams (2000:136) further asserts that "standardised procedures are necessary in establishing performance standards. Without standards for implementation and outcomes, portfolio assessment will become whimsical, capricious, and unfair because it increases the subjectivity teachers bring to evaluation", and that "this unreliability will threaten any benefits portfolio assessment brings and make it lose its appeal because portfolio assessment was, indeed, developed with the goal of making the evaluation of classroom writing more objective, more fair, and more realistic" (p.147).

The literature here again clearly demonstrates that there are no easy answers to the debate on the appropriateness of the portfolio assessment system. From these unresolved issues one therefore feels that the reasons for adopting this type of assessment must be compelling enough to eliminate any controversy surrounding portfolio assessment.

Tutors' Mandate in the BCP Programme

To accomplish the given tasks, learners were expected to work with a tutor who would have some face-to-face contact with the learners in a classroom/workshop learning situation to help learners pinpoint their particular difficulties in writing and to find solutions which would help them. Learners would further have the opportunity to use the tutor as an online colleague and editor during the programme. The BCP Learner Manual (2003:3) shows the importance of learner motivation in the following extracts from the forewords in the three phases:

"The BCP is based on needs expressed by people like yourself who want to improve their business writing and presentation skills and it has been divided in three phases so that people do only those parts of the programme that they need".

"....to build ...confidence and capacity to communicate effectively in the workplace, verbally and in writing and to make the programme the learners' own"

In assessing the individual tasks, tutors were required to address content, organization, language and presentation. A report on the participant's interaction with the mentor was also required.

Findings

The assessment guides were provided in the first BCP learner manual of 2003. They were revised in 2004 in an attempt to standardise mentoring and direct tutors to aspects of editing that certain mentors were overlooking. The new guides required that:

1. The structure of text is coherent, logical and well sequenced.
2. The text conforms to the major features associated with the text type.
3. The text fulfils its purpose, and its register is appropriate to the audience and context.
4. Major language errors are identified and the required changes are made.
5. Layout, spelling, punctuation and small grammatical errors are checked and corrected where necessary.
6. Information is checked for accuracy and correctness.
7. The edited text makes use of plain, clear language and is clearly an improvement on the original.
8. The final copy is proof-read to ensure that it is completely satisfactory.

However, the mentoring continued to be unsatisfactory, and the consortium therefore revised the guidelines in February 2004. In the revised programme the tutors were required to:

1. Make feedback explicit and not too cryptic to be of real use.
2. Use the Outcomes to direct learners to aspects of the task to be achieved
3. Use workplace visits to gain an insight into the demands of the learner's work environment and to deal with issues related to the learner's writing and/or presentation skills
4. Use the opportunity to help the participant schedule her/his work in order to create a regular flow of work between the mentor and the learner
5. Return portfolios in a face-to-face meeting with the learner, especially if some tasks were still not regarded as competently done
6. Encourage learners to be equally pro-active in terms of checking whether the tutor had received work and/or returned work, which the learners may not have received
7. Aim at returning work within 48 hours of receiving it
8. Call or email the learner to explain and reschedule the return of drafts if, for any reason, you could not fulfil the promise made to return the work" (Mentor Guidelines, 2004:2-4)

In addition, these Guidelines introduced a new portfolio requirement: two real workplace tasks from each learner's particular circumstances.

Approaches to Commentary

Tutors had different ideas about what kind of guidance to give. Some tutors edited and instructed while others gave comments and suggestions. The following excerpts from the learners' portfolios exemplify the difference in approach:

In one instance, a tutor used a word she knew did not exist in English in her comments on her learner's work:

Sample 1

"My query was not based on disbelief but really an embarrassment of `quirking' (I am sure this word doesn't exist but it certainly expresses what I feel) a sentence here and there – because that's all I can really do".

The following example illustrates the fact that even though the learners were able to use Microsoft Word, some of them did not still utilise the Microsoft Word Spellchecker.

Sample 2

"TO: ALL OF THE COLLEQUES

SUBJECT: FINANCIAL & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP"

In another case, a tutor highlighted the parts of the text that the learner needed to correct and made the following final comments:

Sample 3

"Hi 1

This letter is BRILLIANT! Very good work. All that needs sorting are the highlighted areas:

responsibilities **and are dealing** with --- grammar rules would need this to be in the Present Simple: "and deal..."

performance areas **as** listed in --- in this case you don't really need the word I have highlighted. Delete it and the sentence is actually easier to read.

of **my achievement.** --- you have many of these, therefore put an "s" on the end of the word."

From these samples it can be confirmed that the tutors' approach to comments varied widely.

Programme Outcome Targets

By the end of the programme it was discovered that only two of the set targets were achieved. These were:

- At least 54% of learners assessed as competent were female.
- High quality materials were available within the Department of Labour to help sustain communication skills development.

In essence only 63.3% of the learners were able to complete specific levels instead of the projected 80%. The percentage of the black learners assessed as competent was 51% as opposed to the targeted 85%. Only four people attended a one day training session instead of the ten targeted. The programme was finally discontinued and therefore could not be used as a model. This encapsulates the general failure of the programme.

What Tutors and Students Say Led to the Failure of the Programme

The following are some of the (unedited) comments made by the tutors about what they thought led to the failure of the programme and what could be done to improve future programmes:

"Fire brigade management of the whole programme by the consortium"

-Comment by Tutor # 1-

"Training materials should be developed through participation of all stakeholders"

-Comment by Tutor # 2-

"Issue of assessment needs more clarification and increased transparency"

-Comment by Tutor # 3-

"Trainers should be racially balanced to avoid prejudices"

-Comment by Tutor # 4-

"More dynamic approaches on English training should be adopted as opposed to biased, fossilised and racially incriminating methodologies"

-Comment by Tutor # 5-

"The programme had potential. However, there was not enough commitment and self-discipline from students to make it viable. It was time consuming and not effective. There were too many practical problems which interfered with the success of the programme. Students did not have enough drive to see things through and expected to be spoon fed instead of taking responsibility for their own learning".

-Comment by Tutor # 6-

"The issue of assessment needs more clarification and increased transparency" and that "the assessment criteria were hazy ie whether what was to be assessed was the student or the tutor."

-Comment by Tutor # 7-

Below are some of the (unedited) comments made by learners. When asked to comment about what they didn't like about the whole programme, some learners responded:

"Some comments made by the Tutors in class, he treated some of us like school children"

-Comment for Learner #1-

"When you ask questions in class, he would say give others a chance, but nobody asks questions"

-Comment by Learner #2-

When asked whether she gained something from this programme, one participant responded:

"Not really, the more I was engaged in my studies the more I got confused. What confused me is the fact that when I do my drafts and submit them, I was expecting that the second draft would be the final one. For example, I did my first draft and submit it, I expect that the mentor should suggest the other way round and when it comes back to me, I have to implement those suggestions and once I submit it for approval, it should be the final draft. It was discouraged when I had to do the changes of the changes. That was the most thing that discouraged me. To do one thing over and over is boring. Sometimes I will attend for the whole day hoping to cover a lot, but when I sit I will realise that I did not do much as I was expecting. The lessons in the class were good but the problem was when I had to do one thing over and over, that is what discouraged me with the course. I lost interest because of that".

-Comment by Learner # 3-

Another student said:

"The Advanced stage of the course was talking to certain kind of work, which I felt that it was not talking to what I do in my office. It made it difficult for me to do research and finish the course. Yes to the rest of the group it was relevant".

-Comment by Learner # 4-

Others said:

"They were changing tutors and they all had...different styles of lecturing".

-Comment by Learner # 5-

"It is a very interesting course and I gained a lot of knowledge. The basic problem that I experienced is that the tutor must be in class with the students to find out what is expected of them".

-Comment by Learner # 6-

Discussion

Setting up the programme

These findings from the questionnaires suggest that the efforts to redress the problems in the programme were being made when the programme was already in the implementation stage. This meant that the tutors who were coming to join later would not be part of the planning process and that learners who had been tutored before these decisions would be subjected to different approaches. This is a considerable departure from what MacCallum and Beltman (1999) recommended when they stated that agreed outcomes should be set with the involvement of all stakeholders.

Programme resources

In relation to the provision of the resources, the results show that although it might have been assumed that participants had proper computer software, not everyone had the appropriate computers, which created problems for the programme once it was implemented. This was in contradiction with what the literature recommends (MacCallum and Beltman, 1999) that there should be adequate financial and other types of resources to acquire suitable time, human and material resources before the beginning of the programme. Furthermore, no CD's, DVD's, Internet materials, or websites were used for the purposes of this training contrary to the initial plans.

Support from the workplace

There appeared to be very little support by the Department of Labour authorities beyond simply allowing the learners to attend training sessions. The learners were left to engage in online learning during work hours. This was problematic as learners were likely to concentrate on either work tasks or mentoring tasks to the detriment of either task.

Relevance of the portfolio tasks to the workplace tasks of the learners

Although it was assumed that workplace tasks could bridge the identified gaps in the workplace, it was difficult to actualise this since some learners came from departments which had nothing to do with certain portfolio tasks, such as writing speeches or writing Parliamentary replies for those who were in the accounts section.

Self-regulated learning

Self-regulated learning has been found to be a necessary element in learners' success, particularly in distance learning modes. In this case this element was crucial because the learners were not full-time students and continued to perform their regular office work. One of the biggest reasons for the students' failure to attend to their work was the lack of time. Had the students been prepared in self-regulated learning, they could have managed their time better so as to attend to their tasks well.

Assessing of learners' work in writing-process

One of the thorny issues in this programme was the question of assessing the portfolios generated through the writing-process. The first challenge was associated with the fact that the guidelines allowed tutors to use different approaches in making commentary depending on whether the learner was assumed to have weak language skills or strong skills. As some tutors provided learners with the actual rephrases to write while others only pointed out the errors and let learners do their own corrections it was problematic to assess the learners' final work using one assessment standard as the efforts put in by the

learners seem to be different (see samples 1, 2, 3). The other problem was that since by and large it was the final draft that mattered, even though in reality the assessors gave credit to evidence of multiple drafts, it was questionable to assume that the learners had acquired skills to produce such error-free texts since they were helped up to the final draft by their tutors.

Although the assessment guidelines regarded the tutor as the primary assessor of the students' work, the reality was that the final decision to pass or fail a portfolio lay in the hands of the senior tutors who were never challenged by the tutors. Moreover, the senior tutors were responsible for allocating the learners to the tutors. Therefore, neither the tutors nor the learners had a choice. To this end the senior tutors were responsible for the fact that none of the black tutors had a white learner even though some of the white tutors had both white and black learners.

The learners' portfolios were initially graded as Pass, Pass with Merit, and Fail. However, when the grading system was implemented, there was some disquiet over the fact that only one black learner managed to pass with a Merit grade compared to the six non black learners who obtained Merit grades among the first learners to complete the course. The learner who passed with Merit was mentored by a white tutor who was a speaker of English as a first language. Although one senior white tutor and assessor, who in fact reported this observation by the participants in a tutors' meeting, argued that the one white learner she tutored was "just generally good", the controversy led to the abandonment of the grading system so that those who later completed the course were no longer classified. This is to be expected in a multi-racial environment like South Africa where people are sensitive to any differentiation that is suggestive of the superiority of the white race over the black race. This therefore signals a warning for those who would like to engage in this type of learning to be sensitive to the issue of assessments. The findings here also confirm the importance of the guidelines proffered by Goldstein, cited earlier on. Starting with the failure of the stakeholders to pay attention to details from the planning stages of the programme, this programme only took a circuitous route to failure-with all the good intentions, dreams and efforts of the architects. The lesson: failure breeds failure just as success breeds success.

Suggestions for the Success of Online Mentoring Programmes in a Linguistically Complex Business Environment

Sensitivity to the selection of tutors in cross-cultural tutoring

This research confirms that a decade after apartheid, the South African society remains a boiling pot of convoluted cross-cultural issues. The inclusion of the two black mentors in this programme is testimony to the efforts made in making black and white faculty work together in cross-cultural mentoring in English in post apartheid South Africa. However, the findings bring out the fact that black tutors felt like interlopers on this programme. As it is not possible to establish why these tutors were not given an opportunity to teach non-black learners, it can only be speculated that if this was done on racial grounds, this is evidence of undeclared racism, which parallels the findings reported by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) about how black mentors in academia are discriminated against in America. In the case of South Africa, it is clear that there is a shortage of skilled black South African manpower, particularly in English education in academia. Expertise in English language education favours some white tutors because they have used English more extensively, and indeed English is the first language for some of them. However, the South African situation is further complicated by the fact that in terms of language, black tutors are assumed to be English as second language speakers which casts doubt on the credibility of the black tutors in a programme concerning English language training. This is so because in South Africa, black speakers of English as a second language are assumed not to have reached the acceptable level of competence in English. In contrast, white speakers of English as a second language are not doubted at all. This attitude could be linked to the fact that during apartheid, black people generally received education that was deemed to be inferior to that received by whites. Because of the language policy during apartheid, black people used English as the language of learning for only eight of their twelve years of schooling, and they did so in unfavourable circumstances marked by poor learning and teaching facilities and resources. In contrast, whites learnt English as a subject for at least twelve of their schooling years in favourable learning conditions. The definition of a speaker of English as a

second language in South Africa may therefore not only depend on the exposure of the speaker to English but also on the colour of the speaker. Because of these complexities in South Africa, sensitivity in selecting tutors for programmes involving English language training is crucial.

Clarity of commentary in process-writing

Regarding the type of commentary tutors make on the writing of the learners, it is recommended that tutors communicate their ideas in a simple and straightforward way, especially when teaching English to speakers of other languages. The example discussed earlier where a tutor coined a word she was sure did not exist is suggestive of how tutors can abuse learners by the way they communicate. Tutors should avoid this.

Regarding the impracticality of the suggestion for the mentors to point out all the errors in the first draft, this study encourages tutors to make their own decisions about what type of errors they can focus on at various levels of the drafts. Advisably, tutors could start by attending to the most severe errors in the first draft and ending with the least severe ones before the final draft. The approach of pointing out all the errors in the first draft is problematic on four grounds. Firstly, pointing out all the errors can psychologically overwhelm the learners. Secondly, this approach by implication makes the learners believe that once they attend to the errors pointed out in the first draft, they should not be required to do their work again (see comment by Learner #3). Thirdly, tutors are only human. They can overlook an error and only see it later however careful they may be. Finally, sometimes the meaning of a word changes depending on new developments made to a sentence and so, within reason, it is possible that tutors can request a change that was earlier rejected, and this is part and parcel of the writing-process.

Tutors working to the same standards in assessing electronic portfolios

The challenges encountered in the case study on the question of assessing electronically generated portfolios are generally appreciated in this study. However, although some studies advocate no specific number of drafts before the final text for assessment (Lehmann 1998), in reality this approach might prove to be an endless exercise which might be too time-consuming and therefore undesirable, particularly in workplace settings where time available for learning is highly limited. Therefore, to draw lessons from the case study where two drafts were recommended, it is recommended that learners be allowed a maximum of four drafts. The second draft can be considered final where the learner has produced the required work, but chances should be given to the learner who seems to be struggling and is believed to be learning more from producing further drafts. So, while learners must be encouraged to produce a good piece of writing at the earliest opportunity, they must be aware of the remaining opportunities available to them so that they are not demoralised when they are asked to produce more drafts later. In the same vein, it must be appreciated that it is possible to have a first draft that is acceptable, in which case no changes might be necessary.

Based on this case study, a careful consideration of the decision to grade or not to grade the portfolios is recommended. Where no entry assessments are conducted to establish that the learners are within the same range of language competence, the portfolios should not be classified beyond pass and fail. However, grading could be applied where the learners are established by appropriate assessment instruments to be within the same range of language competence. In this case, it is important to make sure that the assessment instrument is well linked to the kind of tasks the learners would be doing on the mentoring programme. There is a need for standardisation.

The need for self-regulation in learners

This research recommends self-regulated learning as a necessary condition to attain success in teaching using online methods. In order to achieve self-regulation, learners should understand their learning situation from the beginning by identifying the time available to them that they can spend on their studies. Learners are recommended to go through a time-management exercise before embarking on the learning programme. To this end, this study finds the observations offered by Tutor # 7 for the need for learners to be self motivated valuable.

It is further recommend that where Novell GroupWise E-mail communication is being used, as the case was on this programme, learners should be trained in accessing their E-mail even outside their work setting. Novell GroupWise is an integrated messaging application that combines electronic mail, personal calendaring, electronic group scheduling, task management, and rules-based message management. Knowledge of how to access the learners Novell GroupWise outside their office setting would afford learners wider latitude in using the time they have outside work hours for learning purposes. They can therefore make better decisions on when they can attend to their office work and their portfolio tasks. Alternatively, learners can use individualised E-mail addresses so that they can access their work any time they feel like without the limitations of Novell GroupWise. Another resource that is yet to be exploited for the benefit of education in South Africa is the mobile phone system. Cellular phones have become so popular in South Africa that it can be assumed that at least every university student owns one. Minges (2001) in fact contends that cell phone communication is one of Africa's success stories. Therefore on account of its popularity, tutors should explore the opportunities that may lie in using mobile technology in process writing. This is one communication tool that can enhance contact in learning using online methods.

The need for learners' computer efficacy

From the research findings it can be concluded that the learners' belief that they can effectively perform Internet computer tasks is essential for the success of learning online. It is therefore recommended that learners acquire computer operating skills before the commencement of a programme.

One of the most critical computer operating skills for the learner is the ability to manipulate the Microsoft Word Spellchecker so that the issue of word spelling is dealt with well before the programme starts. Related to this function is the need for the learner's general awareness of the language programmes available on the computer. For example, learners must always set the language of the text in either UK or American English for the computer to capture the wrongly spelled word automatically. This awareness is important because even if the spellchecker function is activated, certain words might not be captured if the language is set in non-standard versions of English used in some countries other than the UK or America. Indeed, decisions should be made from the beginning as to the type of English to be used during the programme. Since online learning involves the use of the computer, there should never be an excuse for learners to make spelling errors in their work once they use the spellchecker function effectively. However, it is important to understand that spellcheckers only deal with spelling and therefore can not detect a word that is used incorrectly if it is spelled correctly.

In addition, learners can use the Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) converter to save documents, and Adobe Acrobat Reader to read Adobe PDF converted documents. This is useful for saving large documents and protecting such documents from unauthorised changes. Free trial Adobe PDF text converter software can be accessed from the Adobe [website](#).

Learners must acquire computer self-efficacy as early as possible so that they can handle the tasks with confidence once the programme starts. One way of ensuring this is to have a pre-training tutorial programme so that all participants are on the same level of technology competency. Planners must therefore take this information into consideration.

By learning online, students can get exposed to various Internet sources of literature which can be useful to them. So students must be aware of these Internet resources available. They must further acquire Internet skills such as accessing and browsing websites so that they can become self-efficacious in Internet use before the beginning of the programme. Learners must also understand the language of e-mails so that they can tell if a message is sent or not, and consider options available to reconcile the information in cases where messages are not delivered. This is important because some learners might be dealing with the computer for the first time and so they need to get rid of the Internet fright that learners who are not so familiar with Internet use might sometimes experience which can slow down the implementation of the programme if it is not taken care of at the right time.

Similarly, the Internet facilities must be reliable enough for learners to succeed in online mentoring using a process approach. According to Moore (1989) "online students need to (a) interact with peers and

instructors through e-mail, (b) use a web browser to access class material, (c) search for Journal articles using the Internet, online databases, and the institution's libraries and submit assignments online". Hilman et al. (1994) proposed (d) asynchronous threaded interface participation as the fourth requirement of interaction. In the case of the DoL training, learners did not use web browsers to access class materials or search for journal articles, databases or the University of South Africa library using the Internet. As the e-mail interaction does not amount to an asynchronous condition, it can be stated that in terms of interaction, the programme only used one of the four modes which is learners' interaction with peers and instructors through e-mail. Research (Hilman et al, 1994) shows that all the four types of interaction are important to online environments and if one type is missing or is not well thought out the online training might fail.

Implications

Although the findings from this research show that online training is fraught with many difficulties, it can be stated that the future of online language training is bright. However, the benefits of online training can only be realised when tutors and learners understand the challenges embedded in this type of learning. Successful tutors in online training will be those who will take keen interest in embracing the opportunities that ICT is offering for the benefit of learners. Based on the reasons that learners and tutors give for the failure of the programme on this case study, it can be concluded that such programmes would stand better chances of success if external factors are not made to influence the programme.

The broad scope of this study was necessitated by the fact that the proponents of the programme combined a variety of learning elements such as workplace-training, online learning approaches, English writing-process, making commentary on the writing of the learners and assessing electronically generated portfolios. Each of these elements had its own challenges. The success of the programme therefore depended not only on how well each element was implemented but also on how well the elements interfaced with each other. In other words, the failure of one element led to the malfunctioning of the whole programme.

Because of the revelations made by this study that not all mentoring yields positive results, researchers are urged to take interest in the methods of mentoring obtaining in various learning settings where English communication tutoring has been taking place, particularly in the English Departments in South African Universities. Universities would be especially interesting places because most of the senior faculty in South African Departments of English Studies are white. As they begin to reach their retiring ages, they would be required to pass their precious knowledge on to the next generation which, in post-apartheid South Africa led by the call for Affirmative Action of Black Economic Empowerment, includes black faculty. It would be interesting to follow up on those who have been mentored to see how they have benefited from this type of learning.

Limitations of the Study

The findings in this study are based on a single case study. As such they cannot be generalised. Because there is little research about distance training using e-learning methods in Africa, the role of the tutors in this type of learning needs to be explored further by more extensive research. One topic for further investigation this study would like to suggest is error analysis. Such an analysis would inform material and syllabus design for workplace English communication mentoring online in South Africa. The benefits of error analysis may have been criticised in the past as being teacher centred as opposed to being learner centred (Rivers and Temperly, 1978:151) but the fact that the generated materials in this case study encompass learner and teacher activities should provide a unique opportunity to inform materials design for both learners and teachers. This is an opportunity for action research.

Other researchers could also take interest in studies concerning e-mail communication in learning. By its very nature, communication using e-mails seems to be associated with casual writing in which issues of spellings, for instance, do not seem to matter so much. It would be interesting to learn from the data left behind from the case study to what extent the influence of e-mail communication played a role in the care taken by the tutors when communicating with their learners.

References

- Anglada L. (1995). On-line writing center responses and advanced ESL students' writing: An analysis of comments, students' attitudes and textual revisions. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Tech University.
- Arndt, V. (1993). Response to writing: Using feedback to inform the writing process. In M. Brock & L. Walters (Eds.), *Teaching composition around the pacific rim: Politics and pedagogy* (pp. 90–116). Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Adelaide: Multilingual Matters.
- Business Communication Programme (BCP) (2003) (Unpublished)
- Brown, J.D. & Hudson, T. (1998). The alternatives in language assessment. *TESOL Quarterly* 32 (1998), pp. 653–675.
- Camp, R. (1993). The place of portfolios in our changing view of writing assessment. In R. Bennett & W. C. Ward (Eds.), *Construction versus choice in cognitive measurement: Issues in constructed response, performance testing, and portfolio assessment* (pp. 183–212). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Chapin, R. & Terdal, M. (1990). Responding to our response: Students' strategies for responding to teacher written comments. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED328098.
- Chi, F. (1999). The writer, the teacher, and the text: Examples from Taiwanese EFL college students. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED442272.
- Cohen, A. (1991). Feedback on writing: The use of verbal report. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 13, pp. 133–159.
- Cohen, A. & Cavalcanti, M. (1990). Feedback on written compositions: Teacher and student verbal reports. In Kroll, B. (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 155–177). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crawford, J. (1992). Student response to feedback strategies in an English for academic purposes program. *ARAL* 15, pp. 45–62.
- Cresswell, A. (2000). Self-monitoring in student writing: Developing learner responsibility. *ELT Journal* 54, pp. 235–244.
- Dessner, L. 1991. English as a second language: college writers' revision responses to teacher-written comments. PhD Dissertation. University of Pennsylvania.
- Ferris, D. (1998). How does teacher feedback affect student revision?—A pilot comparison between ESL and NES writing teachers and their students. Paper presented at the 32nd Annual TESOL Convention, Seattle, WA.
- Ferris, D. & Hedgcock, J. (1998). *Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gill, K. (1993). *Process and portfolios in writing instruction*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Goldstein, L. (2004). Questions and answers about teacher written commentary and student revision: teachers and students working together The Monterey Institute of International Studies
- Goldstein, L. & Kohls, R. (2002). Writing, commenting and revising: The relationship between teacher feedback and student revision online. Paper presented at the American Association of Applied Linguistics Conference, 6–9 April 2002, Salt Lake City, Utah.

- Gough, D. (1996). *English in South Africa. A dictionary of South African English on historical principles*, ed. by Penny Silva. Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Hamp-Lyons, L. & Condon, W. (2000). *Assessing the portfolio: Principles for practice, theory, and research*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Herman, J.L. & Winters, L. (1994). Portfolio research: A slim collection. *Educational Leadership* 52 (1994), pp. 48–55.
- Huot, B. & Williamson, M. (1997). Rethinking portfolios for evaluating writing: Issues of assessment and power. In Yancey, K. & Weiser, I. (Eds.), *Situating portfolios: Four perspectives* (pp. 43–56). Logan, UT: Utah State University Press
- Hyland, F. (1998). The impact of teacher written feedback on individual writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 7, pp. 255–286.
- Hyland, F. (2000) ESL writers and feedback: Giving more autonomy to students. *Language Teaching Research* 4, pp. 33–54.
- Johnson-Bailey, J. & Cervero R.M. (2004). *Mentoring in black and white: the intricacies of cross cultural mentoring*, Mentoring and tutoring vol.12 No. 1, Carfax publishing
- Lehmann, C. (1998). *Technology, Community and the Writing Process*: www.Cyber Mentor Guide.htm
- Learnership Act of 1998. Pretoria, Government Printer.
- MacCallum, J. & Beltman, S. (1999). *International Year of Older Persons Mentoring Research Project*, Murdoch University
- Minges, M. (2004). *African telecommunications indicators 2004*, International Telecommunications Union.
- Muncie, J. (2000). Using written teacher feedback in EFL composition classes. *ELT Journal* 54, pp. 47–53
- National Skills Development Strategy of 2001. Pretoria, Government Printer.
- Rivers, M.W., & Temperly, M.S. (1978). *A practical guide to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saito, H., (1994). Teachers' practices and students' preferences for feedback on second language writing: A case study of adult ESL learners. *TESL Canada Journal* 11, pp. 46–70.
- Silva, P. (1998). *South African English, Oppressor or Liberator?*.Htm
- Song, B. & August, B. (2002). Using portfolios to assess the writing of ESL students: a powerful alternative? *Journal of Second Language Writing* 11 (2002) 49-72, Pergamon
- The constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Pretoria, Government Printer.
- Williams, J. D. (2000). Identity and reliability in portfolio assessment. In B. Sunstein & J. Lovell (Eds.), *The portfolio standard* (pp. 135–148). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Yancey K. B, (1999). Looking back as we look forward: Historicizing writing assessment. *College Composition and Communication* 50 (1999), pp. 483–503.

Appendix

Learners' questionnaire

Dear participant,

Please help us to evaluate the mentoring provided during the Unisa/Sached Business Communication Programme in 2003 – 2004 by answering the following questions in this questionnaire. Please be frank. This questionnaire is anonymous.

1. Do you think the BCP catered for your particular writing needs?
2. Was the BCP relevant to your daily work at DoL?
3. Did the training and mentoring have similar teaching aims?
4. Did you gain anything from the programme?
5. What did you like or not like about the whole programme?

Questionnaire for tutors

Instructions:

Dear participant,

Please help us to evaluate the mentoring provided during the Unisa/Sached Business Communication Programme in 2003 – 2004 by answering the following questions in this questionnaire. Please be frank. This questionnaire is anonymous.

1. What do you think led to the failure of the Department of Labour Business Communications Programme?
2. What would you suggest should be done to ensure success in similar programmes in the future?

Manuscript received 22 Aug 2007; revision received 18 Nov 2007.



This work is licensed under a

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)