
THIRTY YEARS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE DISTANCE MODE : AN ANALYSIS OF APPROACHES ADOPTED BY OUSL

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Abstract

Interaction has been recognized as a key tenet in Distance Education (DE) literature due to the integral role it plays in all formal education. Moore (1993) distinguished among three forms of interaction in DE; student-student, student-teacher and student-content. This concept has been further expanded by introducing the dimension of time, i.e. whether the interaction is synchronous, asynchronous or mixed. A meta-analysis of seventy four DE research studies which looked at the effects the three kinds of interactions had on student achievement (Bernard et. al. 2010) found that for programmes to be effective, course designers must plan for all three types of interaction, in a mix that provides the type of interaction most suitable for the varied teaching tasks in the different subject areas.

This paper seeks to critique and comment on the evolution of an English language program offered by the Department of Language Studies of the Open University of Sri Lanka, over a period of 30 years, in terms of the three types of interactions – the combination, the weighting given to each, whether asynchronous, synchronous or blended and the suitability of the mix for the learning/teaching of language. It will also consider the interactions planned for by course designers and the actual interaction behaviors that took place as reported by tutors and learners. Data for the study was obtained from documents, interviews with successive coordinators of the programme and student surveys carried out at various times.

Upon review, we will attempt to draw insights into approaches to ELT in the distance mode in Sri Lanka and highlight key factors that need to be taken into consideration as we move towards the future.

1. Introduction

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was among the earliest universities in the world to offer language courses via the distance mode. In the 1980's, when the Department of Language Studies began developing courses to teach English as a second language, there were no models to follow and neither was there a body of research draw on. Educators therefore, had to create and develop their own methods for teaching language at a distance. The Certificate in Professional English which was the first language course to be thus developed, targeted persons who were or wished to be employed as white collar workers. This programme has evolved and undergone many changes over 28 years in the attempt to make it a)

more Distance Education (DE) oriented and b) more suited to the learning needs of the Sri Lankan distance learner.

Distance Education (DE) technologies and practices too have, in the last 30 years, undergone radical transformations from 1st generation print-based correspondence courses to the current 5th generation of DE described as 'intelligent flexible learning' (Taylor, 2010). The theoretical and methodological developments have been fuelled by extensive research into DE across the world and, have yielded a great many insights on how the learning outcome can be maximized.

This paper seeks to critique and comment on the evolution of the English program offered by the Department of Language Studies of the OUSL in terms of recent theoretical, conceptual and technical developments in DE. It is hoped that a critical review of this nature will yield insights into English language teaching in the distance mode in the Sri Lankan context as well as highlight key factors that need to be taken into account as DE move towards 4th and 5th generations.

The theoretical basis that will be used for the review will be the concept of Interaction in DE. Moore (1989, 1993) distinguished between three types of interaction – student-content (SC), student-teacher (ST) and student-student (SS). Subsequently, Holden and Westfall (2006) expanded this concept to encompass the manner in which the interaction takes place – asynchronous, mediated synchronous or blended. Technological developments that took place in the field of DE will form the back drop to the discussion.

The Input-Interaction and Output theory of language learning (Gass 2000; Gass and Selinker 2001) will provide the theoretical framework for the role that interaction plays in the learning and teaching of language.

This paper will review the Certificate in Basic English¹ in terms of the three types of interactions identified by Moore (op.cit.) – the strength or time allocated to each type, the manner and the suitability of the mix for learning and teaching of language. It will also look at the Interactional Treatments planned for by course designers and the actual interaction behaviors that took place as reported by students and tutors.

Data for the study was obtained from a variety of sources: a) documentary evidence by examining successive course materials (print, audio & video), student guide books, teaching schedules, and tutor guidelines b) institutional memory through interviews and discussions with successive coordinators of the programme and c) data from student surveys carried out at different times.

¹ *The two year Certificate in Professional English programme was split into two in 1995 and the lower level was named the Certificate in Basic English (CBE).*

2. Evolution of Distance Education

Distance educators have utilized technological innovations – print, electronic and digital, to bridge the physical distance between the learner and teacher. Following Taylor (2010) the evolution of DE is summarized below

1 st Generation DE	Print	Correspondence Model
2 nd Generation	Electronic media, TV / Radio, AV	Multi-media Model
3 rd Generation	information technologies, audio & video teleconferencing, broadcast TV/radio. Audiographic communication systems, video conferencing	Telelearning Model
4 th Generation	Computer-mediated. Combine high quality CD ROM based interactive multimedia (IMM), with access to an increasingly extensive range of teaching-learning resources offered through the Internet	Flexible Learning Model
5 th Generation	IMM	Intelligent Flexible Learning

3. English at OUSL

The first language teaching programme to be offered by the OUSL (in 1982), the Certificate in Professional English, was designed to teach general English and targeted persons who were or wished to be employed as white collar workers. The programme has undergone many changes over the years to accommodate the changing needs of learners as well as the evolutions and innovations in the fields of English language teaching (ELT) and DE. One such major change was the splitting up of the previously two year programme, into two separate certificate courses – the Certificate in Professional English and the Certificate in Basic English (CBE). The modifications to the contents were effected to accommodate students who had different levels of proficiency at entry. However, the objectives of the programmes – that of developing general language proficiency of persons working in an office environment, remained unchanged. For reasons of conciseness this paper will focus on the lower level course – Certificate in Basic English.

The CBE consists of three courses (of 150 hours each) in a) Reading b) Writing and c) Listening and Speech. The teaching approach adopted, as with most courses at OUSL, is one where the course designers decide on the courses content and progression rather than an ‘open curriculum’ approach. Most students who follow CBE are employed in the government and private sectors as executives, clerks,

administrative officers and junior managers. Police officers, nurses and persons working in the non-governmental sector also follow the programme. Students are selected for the programme based on their performance at a placement test administered at entry. Students who score between 20 - 50 at this test, are assigned to CBE. Currently this programme is offered in 29 centres² across the island and was offered in 20 centres at the time of launching. The student numbers that enroll for the course vary between 2000 to 2500 per year.

4. Interaction in Language Learning

The concept of interaction in language acquisition is used to refer to acts of communication that provide learners with opportunities to obtain meaningful linguistic input that results in learning. Learners are usually exposed to input in the classroom - with the teacher and with other learners when they engage in meaningful language activities. The input that learners receive through interaction can come in many forms - recast, repetition, reformulation and other forms of language modification and explanations on the part of the expert or more proficient speaker, as a result of something said by the learner (Long, Inagaki and Ortega 1998).

Example 1 - (reformulation).

Learner: sir I went to the department to meet a *lecture*

Teacher: oh... you went to meet a *lecturer*?

Learner: Yes.. a *lecturer* (Jayatillake, 2009:7)

Example 2 - (elaboration)

Teacher: Where did you go yesterday?

Learner: What?

Teacher: Did you go to the zoo or to the garden (Gass, 2002)

Example 3 - (Learner-Learner scaffolding)

Learner A: **the sun is top of page*

Learner B: *Is at the top?*

Learner A: Yes. *Is at the top.* (Mackey et. al. 2007)

² *The OUSL has a network of centres located in all parts of Sri Lanka . In addition to providing students with comprehensive instructional materials, the OUSL also conducts day-schools at these centres – i.e. face-to-face (F-to-F) discussions where students get the opportunities to interact with tutors.*

It is believed that input, which learners receive when communication breaks down (as seen in examples 1 & 2), enables them to 'notice the gap' in their current language knowledge and thus 'learn' the required element (Gass and Selinker 2001). Thus, it is through 'interaction' that each learner receives the 'input' that is suitable to her/his current language learning needs (i.e. *interlanguage*). It is evident then, that individual learner needs will differ.

Example 3 shows that peer interaction leads to the co-construction of knowledge. Research in ELT has clearly shown that language learners retain what is learnt through this type of knowledge building much longer than teacher explanations or learning from books (Swain & Lapkin, 2001)

The input received through interaction can be positive or negative – that which provides the learner with the accepted target language format as in above examples is positive evidence. Negative evidence, on the other hand, is found mainly in the explanations and lessons presented by teachers.

Thus interactions that provide individualized input can only be obtained through the negotiation of meaning (via verbal communication) with another human being.

5. Interaction in DE

Learning, according to cognitive theory is the acquisition of knowledge or skills which brings about *changes* in the learner's understanding, her perspectives or cognitive structures as a result of some form of interaction - which, as defined by Wagner (2004) are "reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interactions occur when these objects and events mutually influence one another" (p.8). The role that interaction - Student-Content, Student-Teacher and Student-Student plays in increasing understanding of course content in DE has been unequivocally confirmed by Bernard et. al. (2009) whose findings were based on a meta-analysis of seventy four DE research studies.

Moore (1989, 1993) encouraged distance educators to "organize programs to ensure maximum effectiveness of each type of interaction, and ensure that they *provide the type of interaction most suitable for various teaching tasks of different subject areas, and for learners at different stages of development*"³ (p. 5). More recently, Anderson (2003a) suggested a finer distinction on the provision of interactivity in DE – that different combinations of Interaction Treatments (i.e. provision of interaction) can be presented in different strengths. Thus, the strength or proportion of time assigned to the different types of interaction can differ depending on the needs of the discipline and competence level of the learner. For example, learning a language would require more human-human interaction than learning history which may need more learner-content interaction.

³ *My italics*

5.1 Student-Content Interaction

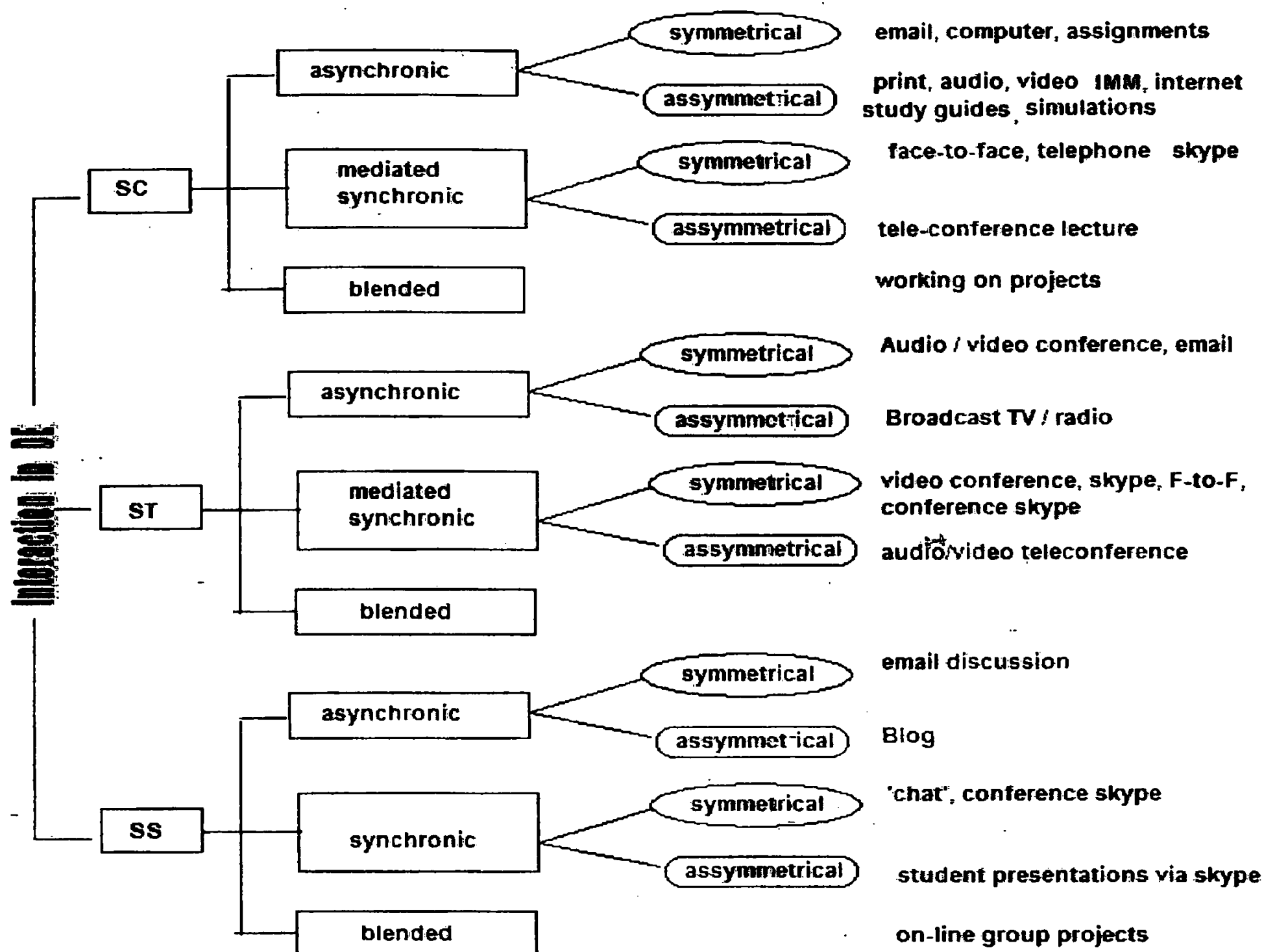
This is common to all forms of education - learning takes place when a learner interacts intellectually with the content or the subject of study. First generation DE used didactic texts where the learner interacted with content presented in the form of print and, subsequently with the development of electronic technologies, with content presented through audio tapes, videotapes, TV, radio and more recently, via the computer. SC interaction includes reading informational texts and study guides, watching videos, interacting with computer-based multimedia, using simulations, or using cognitive support software (e.g., statistical software), as well as searching for information, completing assignments, and working on projects.

According to Holden and Westfall (2006) SC interaction can be *asynchronous* – i.e. the teaching and learning do not take place at the same time or, *mediated synchronous*, where teaching-learning takes place simultaneously. Learning via audio, video or internet is asynchronous while face-to-face⁴ or skype interactions are mediated synchronous and lend themselves to more natural conditions for interaction, especially ST and SS.

Holden and Westfall draw a further distinction between interaction that is *asymmetrical*, i.e. one way interaction (watching a videotaped lecture) and, *symmetrical*, i.e. when both parties are equally involved as in an email discussion forum. We can combine these ideas with technological innovations developed to date, as follows.

⁴ *Class room discussions*

Figure 1 – Interaction in Distance Education



However, the categories above are not mutually exclusive and often synchronous, asynchronous and blended patterns contain elements of both symmetrical and asymmetrical interaction.

A summary of the evolution of the interaction mix in the language programme is presented in Table 1. The table presents a very brief description of the key new materials introduced (Column 2), the period they were introduced in (in Column 1) and the technology used for delivery (Column 3),⁵ Columns 4,5 and 6 are an analysis of the materials in terms of the interaction types discussed in Figure 1 and the last column indicates the generation of DE.

⁵ The information provided by Mrs. A. P. Munasinghe (Programme Coordinator 1982 to 1995) and Ms. P Fernando (Programme Coordinator 1997-2010) is gratefully acknowledged.

Period	Description	Delivery	SC	ST	SS	DE General
1. 1982	Professional English Part I and Part II, course books, 1 audio cassette	Print, Audio, Face-to-Face Asynchronous / synchronous (F2F)	Sinhala translations in course books asymmetrical	24 F-to-F sessions (72 hours), teacher mediated symmetrical > asymmetrical	Teacher decided. No specific activities in material for SS interaction symmetrical	Multi-media audio 2nd generat
Description						
2. 1985 -1990	01 Video cassette -available in the AVRC	Print, Audio, Face-to-Face, Video, 18 Centres Asynchronous / synchronous (F2F)	Audio cassette and Video cassette available at the centre asymmetrical	72 hrs F-to-F teacher mediation symmetrical > asymmetrical	Speech book, SS interaction in class, No specific activities symmetrical	multi-media print/audio, 2nd generat
Description						
3. 1991 - 1993	Student Guide booklet Reference Grammar books Supplementary Reader Training of Visiting Instructors	Print, F-to-F, Audio, Video Asynchronous / synchronous (F2F)	Time allocation increased to 375 hrs asymmetrical	75 hrs F-to-F teacher mediation - ST I formalized symmetrical > asymmetrical	In class: Decided by Teacher, some group activities to enhance communication & practice symmetrical	Multi-media 2nd generat
Description						

Period	Description	Delivery	SC	ST	SS	DE Gen
4. 1995 - 1998 CBE	3 courses, 06 printed texts, 2 audio cassettes + Listening & Speech book 03 Videos + workbooks	Print, F-to-F, Audio, Video	total allocation : 375 hrs of which 36 hours for self-access Listening	75 hrs F-to-F teacher mediation - more individualized	In-class 25 hours Speech - meaningful SS I based on self-access listening	Multi-m
		Video -Small group interaction		Failure due to lack of resources at centres		
Description		Asynchronous / synchronous (F2F)	asymmetrical	symmetrical & asymmetrical	symmetrical	2nd gen
5. 2006	Print Materials revised	Print, F-to-F, Audio, Video				Multi-m
Description		Asynchronous / synchronous (F2F)	asymmetrical	symmetrical & asymmetrical	symmetrical	2nd gen
2009	Island wide student / teacher survey					Multi-m
2010-2011	Designing & introducing on-line self-access materials	on-line	asymmetrical	Asymmetrical	asymmetrical / symmetrical	4th gen interactive technology

5.1.1 SC Interaction in the CBE

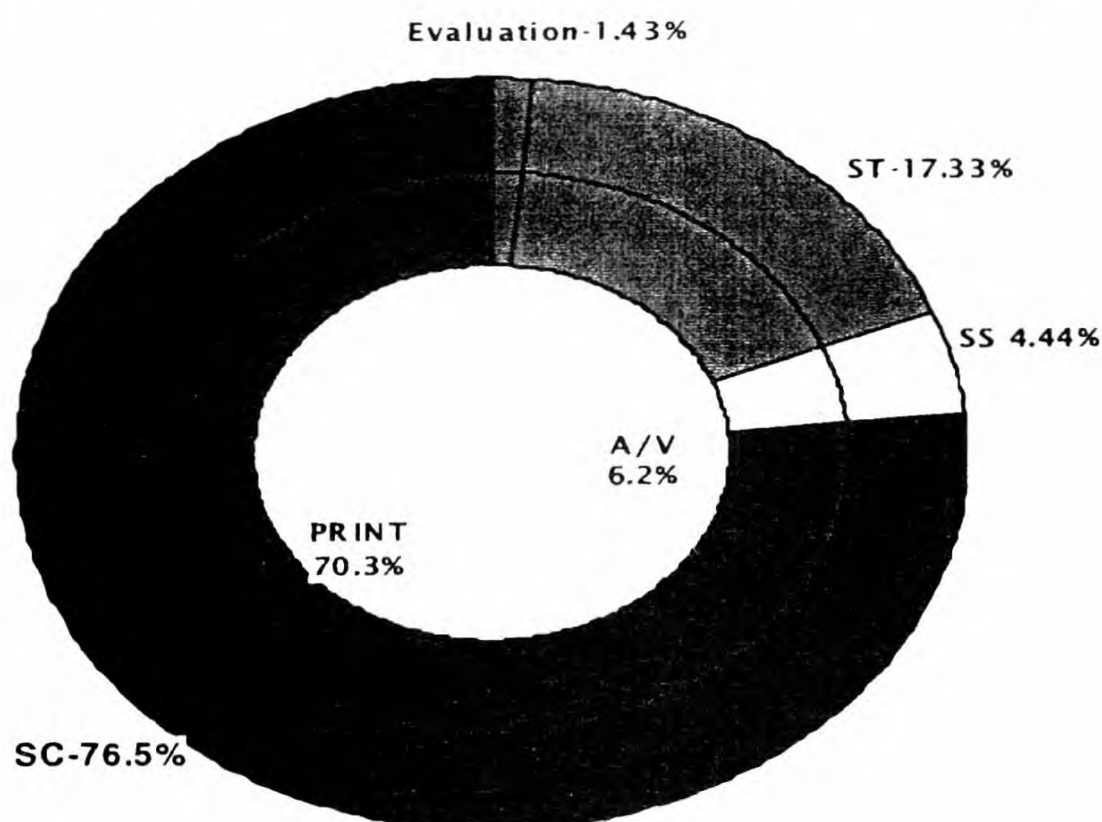
Although OUSL language educators have continued to experiment with using technological developments for teaching content, from inception, perhaps justifiably, we still rely heavily on first generation technology (i.e. print) and to some extent on 2nd generation (i.e. audio / video). (See Table 1, Column 7) One reason for this could be because even in conventional institutions, although it is stated that tertiary level learners engage for the greater part in meaningful face-to-face interaction, as pointed out Bates, it is a myth - *“for both conventional and distance education students, by far the largest part of their studying is done alone, interacting with textbooks and other learning media”* (Bates, 1991, p6).

Lack of equity of access to newer technologies such as the use of videos to foster small group interactions has also held OUSL language educators back from using such innovations after its initial venture in 1995 (see figure 2).

Although in the last few years reading on the computer has become a technological possibility, for the Sri Lankan distance learner, print was and continues to be, the cheapest and most accessible medium. Hence, 70.3% of the SC interaction is in the print mode in the current CBE (see figure 2 below). Given the current competitive educational environment however, and learner exposure to varying technologies in the world outside the classroom, SC interaction in future course materials could be enhanced by exploring more 4th generation technologies such as moodle. The establishment of NAC centres at OUSL would a) enable students to learn via the use of more interactive technologies that lend themselves more to self-checking than print / audio / video b) enable the employed learner to select the time of learning since it is asynchronous. The proposed introduction of self-access on-line materials in 2011 is a move towards using 4th generation DE.

Since NAC centres are distributed across the island, learners enrolled at all centres could have equal opportunities to interact with the content. However, as our past experiences with video have amply demonstrated, when using new technologies for pedagogy it is necessary to ensure that students attached to all centres have equal access to the resources. The option would be to create blended courses that would not disadvantage students who cannot be provided with access to the newer technologies.

Figure 2: Interaction mix planned for by Course Designers in the current CBE



5.2 ST interaction

The instructor, who is the mediator between the learner and the content can appear in different forms in DE – in print, through other technologies (e.g. audio / video / computer, teleconferencing etc.,) or face-to-face (F-to-F) as in conventional education (although the strategies employed in class might differ according to the mode). According to Moore (1993), the instructor in DE, in addition to mediating between content and learners has to ascertain if learners are making progress, and to decide whether to change strategies. Instructors must also provide counsel, support and encouragement to each learner. Such mediation however, is possible only with mediated synchronic (either symmetrical or non symmetrical) interaction contexts. Thus, the role instructors can play in DE differs depending on the technology used.

5.2.1 ST interaction in the CBE

Since the English programmes at OUSL rely largely on print, issues of content – learner mediation and individual support is addressed through on-site visiting instructors. 17.33% of time is allocated to this face-to-face (F-to-F) component. The visiting instructors provide on the spot feedback in the form of clarification, recast, repetition and reformulation - language modification that arises *only* in human – human interaction situations. The F-to-F sessions thus provide input that is appropriate to the individual learner's particular learning need. Asynchronous and/ or asymmetrical technologies cannot provide this type of ST interaction. In addition, it is hard to motivate language learners through static content such as print.

The F-to-F sessions have also helped bridge the gap by dealing with areas of difficulty faced by a particular group of students in understanding key concepts in grammar, vocabulary or expression – which is especially required in a context such as Sri Lanka where language competence appears to vary from region to region (Raheem & Ratwatte, 2001). The visiting instructors have also been especially useful in responding to the learners' application of new knowledge (grammar or use of particular vocabulary item / pronunciation of a word) because, self-directed language learners are vulnerable at the point of application. They do not know enough of the language to be sure that they are 1) applying it correctly, 2) applying it as intensively or extensively as possible or desirable (e.g. *jewelleries, *falm oil'), or 3) aware of all the potential areas of application. It is for on-the-spot feedback in the form language modification that a human instructor is vital in language teaching as it provides the learner with input that is appropriate to his/her *particular* learning need. The presence of an instructor also personalizes the input to the needs of each student in other ways, for example, when students and their instructor are attending to a common language text (print / audio / video) each student's response to the presentation is different – to some a misunderstanding is explained, to others elaborations/simplifications given, analogies drawn, supplementary readings suggested. The video lessons introduced in 1995 were designed for small group interactions between learners and their instructor with the intention of fostering this type of interaction which provides personalized input (Table 1, Row 4). Asynchronuous and/ or asymmetrical technologies cannot provide this type of language modification that arises *only* when communication breaks down.

On the other hand, asynchronous modes of teacher-student interaction such as printed study guides, audiotapes, videotapes, computer-based courseware, and other 4th generation technologies are more convenient for the employed learner with family responsibilities. These technologies allow students the opportunity to interact with a teacher at a time and in a place convenient to each person. In effect, these "flexible access" technologies (Taylor, 1995) allow the student to turn the teacher on, or off at will, as lifestyle permits. Furthermore, students have the added advantage of individual interaction with the instructor via electronic correspondence.

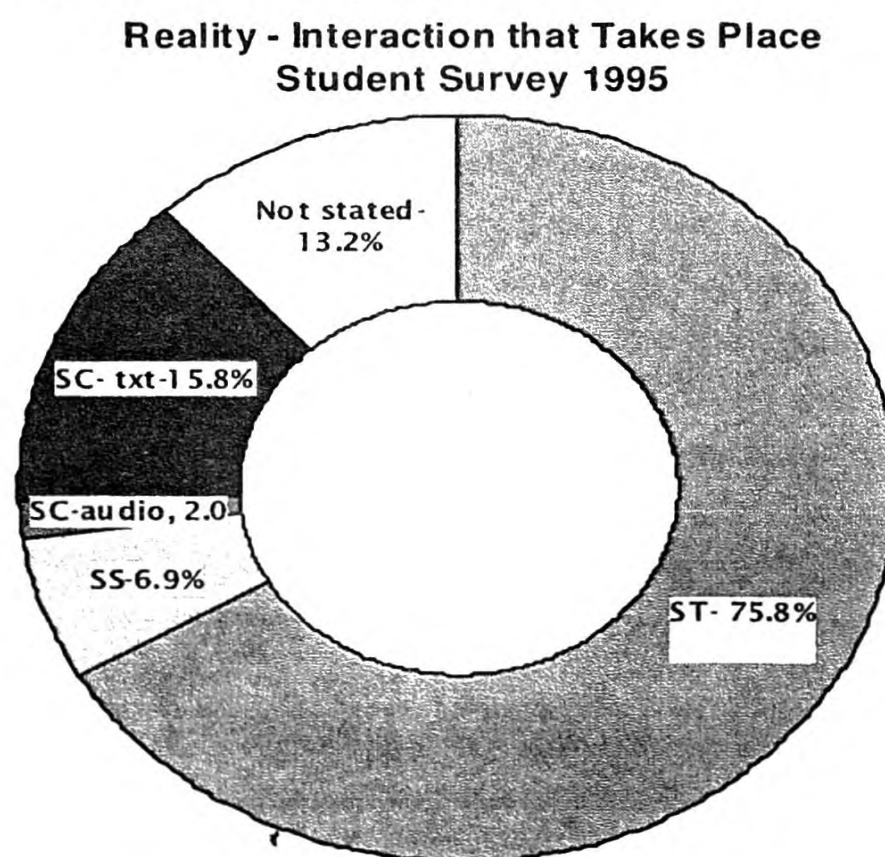
A further dimension in education that has been highlighted by Bates (1991) is that there are two very different types of interactivity in learning: social and individual. Social interaction between learners and teachers needs to be balanced with the individual student's interaction with teaching-learning resources that rely on technologies. With computers becoming more sophisticated however, there is a move to transform ST and SS interaction into enhanced forms of student-content interaction. However questions have been raised as to how such progress would affect the traditional relationships and bonds that have come to be valued

by students and teachers alike (Anderson, 2003a). Distance educators therefore need to build in mechanisms that fulfill both types of interaction.

Although some people are of the opinion that face-to-face teaching is both uninspired and uninspiring, others hold the view that it is a tried and tested system that has proved effective for generations. The extensive surveys carried out (Ratwatte, 1995, Ratwatte & Abeysooriya 2009) indicate that this is the view largely held by OUSL students who also suggested increasing the number of day-schools⁶. Figure 3 below shows that in 1995, ST interaction was higher than student interaction with materials or with each other. This partiality of the SL learner is further supported in a previous study carried out at OUSL with students in the Postgraduate Diploma (PG Dip) in Education (Wijeratne, 1991, cited in Lekamge, 1997) where it is observed “... from the students’ point of view, face-to-face contact enhances their psychological satisfaction, confidence and feeling of belonging and emotional security..... therefore, they have shown a strong desire for face-to-face interaction while studying through distance materials” (p.194) Perhaps the education-cultural background the adult SL student favors a more social learning culture than the more individualistic learning style encouraged in western modes of education.

The survey carried out in 1995 indicates a very low usage of the audio / video content designed for individual SC interaction. Although the fact that the average SL learner in 1995 was less exposed to newer technologies and therefore was unaware of their potential or, the reluctance on the part of older learners (who constitute the majority) to use these new technologies could have contributed to the mismatch between what the DE programme designers planned for and the ground reality - (see figure 3 below), it is also important to see why people do what they do, not just in terms of availability (or access) to resources, but why they act in certain ways with them.

Figure 3: The Interaction that actually takes place



⁶ The F-to-F sessions that provide learners with opportunities for interacting with a teacher / fellow student/s

The interaction mix that course designers have planned for in the current CBE (2009) is given in figure 2. Although course designers have planned for a 70.5% SC interaction and 17.35% ST interaction, the ground reality could be different with students still looking towards ST interaction as the primary source of content. A recent survey (Ratwatte & Abeysooriya, 2009) carried out with ESP⁷ students indicates that 11.5% students want more day-schools while 17.5% requested more workshops lead by university academics. Once again this raises questions regarding the learning styles.

5.3 SS interaction

In DE inter-learner interaction, whether it is alone or in a group setting, with or without the 'presence' of an instructor is a new dimension. In language learning however, the contribution peer interaction or 'scaffolding' (Swain & Lapkin, 1998) that learners provide each other when engaged in meaningful interaction is acknowledged (see Examples 1-3) and thus group and pair work techniques have been used in ELT extensively as a means of facilitating the co-construction of knowledge. SS interaction also helps in motivation and fulfils the requirements for social dependency.

In traditional education, 'the class' was used for reasons that had nothing to do with learner needs. It was the only organization form possible for delivering teaching, application, communication, evaluation and student support. Now however, SS interaction is regarded as a key component in education. "SS interaction is an extremely valuable resource for learning and is sometimes even essential" (Moore 1993 p6) and in even in distance education (Bernard et. al., 2009)

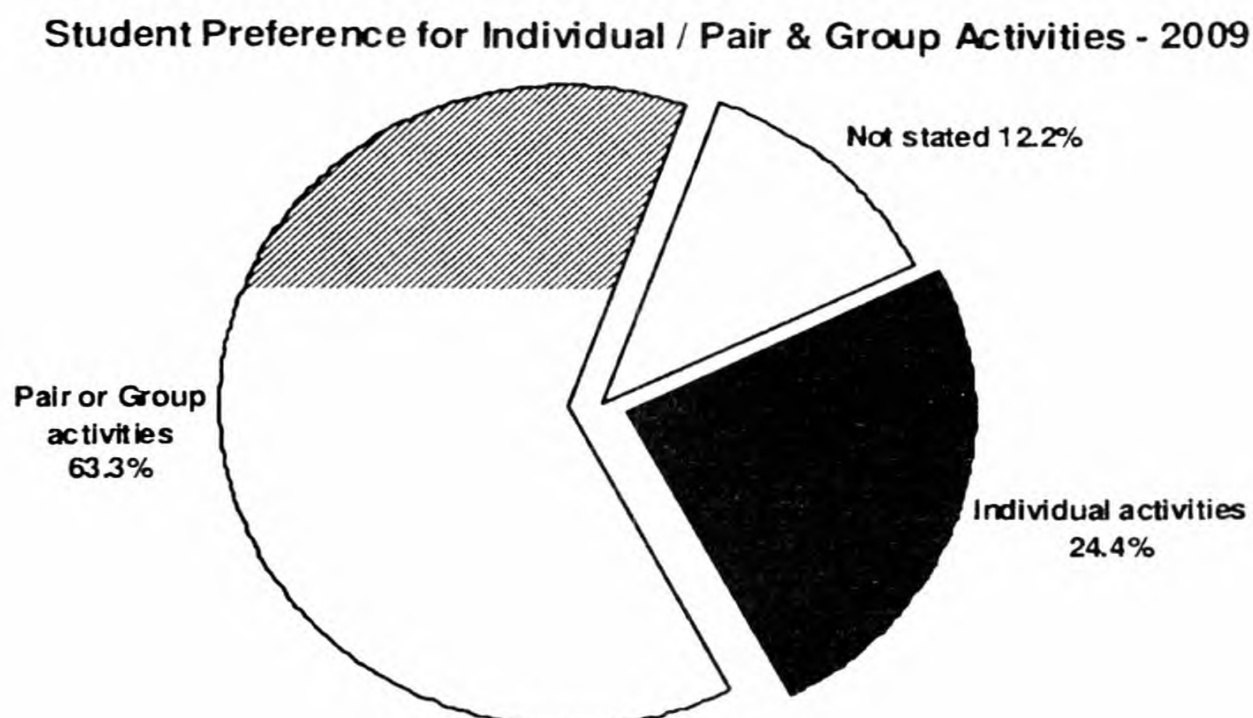
A further dimension of using group work for education is the role it plays in equipping the learner to function effectively in committees and other group activities which are essential in modern society.

A hitherto under discussed phenomenon is the learning style of Sri Lankan learners. Informal conversations with students and exchange of ideas with academics from other disciplines at OUSL and other universities seem to suggest that a large number of Sri Lanka learners like to study in groups⁸. This fact has been noted and the measure adopted to cater to the students' need, in the PG Dip. in Education, has been to provide "...more opportunities to discuss academic and personal problems of the teacher trainees in small groups" (Lekamge, 1997:195). A recent survey carried out with learners in the ESP courses (Ratwatte & Abeysooriya, 2009) indicate that language learners too prefer to engage in group work (in class) than in individual activities – see figure 4. The fact that 63.3% of OUSL language learners prefer to engage in group / pair work than in individual activities seems to confirm the social nature of their style of learning .

⁷ESP - English for Specific Purposes courses conducted for students following Degrees in Science, Nursing, Law, Management, Engineering etc – i.e. English for Management, English for Nursing etc.,

⁸Group study or 'kuppi classes' are very popular among university students and learners at secondary levels.

Figure 4. Student preferences for individual, Pair or Group activities



5.3.1 SS interaction in the CBE

The current Basic English programme makes provision for student-student interaction during the face-to-face sessions. The speech and reading components contain specific activities that require SS interaction. However as seen in figure 5 only 4.4% of time is spent on SS interaction. Given that it is accepted that SS interaction plays a key role in motivation and fulfils the requirements for social dependency, and the Sri Lankan language learners' stated preference for group activity supported by observations made by academics, group learning seems to be a key factor in the learning style of the Lankan student. This then is an area that is under-exploited in the CBE.

Although it is easy to design synchronous group / pair work for use in a classroom setting, distance educators need to make use of techniques such as asynchronous email, and synchronous 'chatting', conference skype etc. when designing peer group interactions via electronic and digital technologies. It has been pointed out that benefits of such forms of interaction however, unlike in the class-room, depends largely on the age, experience and level of autonomy of learners (Moore, 1993).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

We saw that the interaction mix has changed significantly over the past 28 years moving from a high ST interaction to a high SC interaction. In the current CBE programme over 75% of the time is apportioned to

SC interaction while the balance 25% is shared by ST and SS interaction. Since the programme is offered in the distance mode, a greater weighting on SC interaction is acceptable, however, since it is a language course where human-human interaction is vital for learning, an increase in SS and ST interaction might increase mastery in communication. Especially in the light of the comment by Moore (1993) who says that student achievement can be optimized by planning for an interaction mix that provides the type of interaction most suitable for the skill, which in this case is language, that is to be taught.

To date, the bulk of the SC interaction has been through print (70%,) while audio and video comprise 8%. Thus, language teaching at OUSL has remained 2nd generation multi-modal DE and all materials are asynchronous and asymmetrical. However, this needs to be situated in context - the print media has been the easiest and cheapest for SL students to access, and in a technologically poor economy where adult learners have to engage in studies amidst work and family commitments, asynchronous and asymmetrical materials were deemed most suitable. Although CBE programme has remained multi-modal 2nd generation since inception in terms of DE, the contents and manner of presentation and has been revised many times to keep up with developments in ELT as well as the SL learners' needs. With advances in more interactive technologies such as moodle or computer based teaching however, more autonomous SC interaction can be encouraged. However, even though the use of 4th & 5th generation DE can significantly impact on language teaching, it should be done cautiously taking into consideration equity of access and the learning style of the SL student.

Currently, ST interaction which is vital in 'providing 'on-the-spot' individualized input that fosters language learning as well as providing motivation, learner support and mediation of content, is limited to face-to-face sessions, i.e. 17.33% of the time. Given the importance that meaningful interaction has in language learning, the amount of time spent needs to be increased. However, since the quality of the visiting instructors vary and F-to-F sessions constrain the distance learner, other forms of ST interaction such as electronic mail (for feedback on writing), the use of NAC centres for quality F-to-F sessions etc., could be explored. It has to be kept in mind that while F-to-F is both synchronic and symmetrical, use of more 4th generation technologies, though symmetrical would be asynchronous.

Given the evidence from language learning of the benefits of 'scaffolding' and the co-construction of knowledge, the weighting given to Student-Student interaction in the current CBE programme (although higher than in the past) is inadequate. Currently learners engage in synchronous symmetrical peer activities only in the class-room. Providing learners with opportunities to engage in group activities via asynchronous email or synchronous 'chatting' or conference skyping is desirable. But given the social nature of the Sri Lankan learner and the

preference for group learning, exploring means for facilitating this natural mode of learning would optimize the learning outcome.

To summarize, a perusal of the evolution of the English Programme at OUSL over nearly 3 decades indicates that successive revisions and restructuring have incorporated developments in ELT and has attempted to accord with the changing needs of learners, but, has more or less remained within 2nd generation DE throughout, due to contextual factors. While recognizing the strength of 2nd generation Multimedia Model DE in facilitating individual interaction with learning materials, given the impact technological innovation has had on most fields of human activity over the past 75 years, it seems a reasonable assumption on the part of distance educators to believe that qualitative improvements in teaching and learning is possible through the judicious application of new technologies to education. However, as discussed, the accessibility to technologies, student readiness to use such technologies must be kept in mind in future programme revisions.

It is also necessary to keep in mind that the models we have been following and the 'norms' we are comparing ourselves with (in the literature on DE) are those which have been observed and fostered in the Western world - an education-culture that is underpinned to a greater extent by individualism. In cultural contexts that are more group oriented (i.e. social learning) which, as is the case in Sri Lanka is further underpinned by a strong tradition of oral learning, perhaps it is time, after 3 decades of DE, for us to define, develop and forge norms more suited to the learning styles of the Sri Lankan and the South Asian distance learner. To develop a learning / teaching model where the socio-economic-cultural 'reality' that is Sri Lanka is encompassed.

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