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## E-learning for language training in India - Liquid

English is a primary language for the urban elite in India; it is the second language for a large population of educated city dwellers who have contributed significantly to the global competitiveness of the country. Indeed it has been widely recognised that the ability to communicate in English has become one of the biggest factors determining the economic growth of the nation.

One consequence is a rising demand for training in the English language. This can arise from college students who would like to improve their employment prospects, through to organisations who employ significant numbers of people who need to communicate regularly using English.

Liquid employs some 200 people and is based in a suburb of Delhi. It produces customised e-learning products for clients and has developed a range of products which support English language training in India. Their main product, English Edge, was developed by licensing content from BBC Worldwide, in October 2003 and formally launched in October 2004. This was the first time that BBC Worldwide licensed content

for a CD-ROM based Instructor-led language course, bespoke to a particular country. The course is based on content from the BBC World News English course and contains BBC news footage that Liqid has combined with local content to provide a bespoke course for the Indian market. The issues involved in adapting the product for Indian users provide some useful insights on the attractions and problems in using e-learning.

## **The learning challenge**

According to Rajiv Tandon, the Liqid Vice-President in charge of the customisation and distribution of English Edge, there are a number of issues facing Indians who aspire to attain proficiency in spoken English. The first is pronunciation and people from various parts of the country face unique region-specific challenges. Ideally, therefore, the teaching approach adopted should reflect the particular difficulties faced by the learners. The second is the fact that many learners ‘think Indian and speak English’. They will translate phrases that are common in their languages into something that appears clumsy in English – for example they will ask ‘What is your good name?’ which is a literal translation from Hindi. A third area concerns grammar: mistakes that can arise in the use of tenses, definite and indefinite articles, and prepositions, amongst others. The fourth area concerns listening and comprehension – there is a need for the learner rapidly to appreciate the nuances of spoken English delivered in a variety of different accents.

Together these constitute a demanding set of learning needs. Moreover the learning product will be used in some very different contexts. In some instances college students will be accessing Liqid’s products along with their regular domain-specific courses. In other cases they will be accessing the material as part of a corporate training program. Recently for example Liqid has entered into an arrangement with Frankfinn – India’s largest cabin crew training provider for aspiring air-hostesses. ‘English Edge’ will be available at the 68 Frankfinn training centres and become a compulsory course for all students and an integral part of their long-term diploma.

Given this range of potential users, Liqid places considerable emphasis on the need for instructor support of learners. This they describe as blended learning. Part of the delivery package involves extensive trainer manuals designed to support trainers, and learner courseware to sustain individual learners. According to Rajiv Tandon, most implementations are 50 per cent computer-based training (CBT) and 50 per cent instructor led training (ILT). Instructor support is important in India in two respects. First, instructors can motivate learners and encourage them to continue and persevere in the event of difficulties. Secondly, since technology-based learning is a new concept, there is a need to encourage learners to try CBT.

While the instructor is important, in Rajiv Tandon’s view the products will always be enriched as technology develops, and will also be deployed in self learning modes. At present this is evident in three separate features of English Edge.

## **Product enhancement**

The first important feature is the use of the BBC News English as the underlying product. This contains news items and current affairs clips. As such it is up-to-date and can engage the adult learner and be seen as relevant to their needs.

The second feature, which is a result of the growing sophistication of the technology, involves audio recording and pronunciation comparison tools. These allow the learner to listen to the right pronunciation and compares this pronunciation with that delivered by the learner. The comparative information is presented in the form of sound waves shown on the screen – these highlight the difference between the target pronunciation and that produced.

The third feature is the use of interactive learning activities. These include online quizzes and on-going assessment tools which can, as with the case of Frankfinn, contribute to the overall certificate. In the view of Rajiv Tandon, “progress can be a powerful incentive”. To date much of the English language training in India has been directed at motivated learners. The model, as can be seen, recognises the limits of technology and depends on the supportive interventions of the instructors. Such interventions become more important for less motivated and less confident learners.

There is scope for future product enrichment using technology, but, there are limits to such enrichment. However Rajiv Tandon is optimistic:

“Technology can enable ordinary trainers to create an extraordinary learning experience and hence will be ideal for markets like India, where the availability of high quality training resources in remote locations is a problem.”

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