



Can mLearning Improve Connectivity and Reduce Waste in ESL?

Lindsay Rattray BA BCS
ClassWired
Twitter: @classwired
lindsay@classwired.com

ABSTRACT

After your next class, ask yourself two things: (1) How connected was it to the lives of your students? (2) How much waste was there? In this paper I reflect on the breadth and depth of both the connectivity and waste problems in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context. I then offer directions for how mLearning can be part of the solution. For this to be realised, we need to harness the capabilities of teachers, students, programmers, publishers, writers and more. Finally, I explain how the business philosophy of the 'Lean Startup' can bind these groups together with the best chance of producing a real solution to the problems of waste and connectivity.

Keywords

ESL, English as a second language, mLearning, language learning, digital classroom materials, lean publishing.

INTRODUCTION: THAT NAGGING FEELING

The Problem of Connectivity

We've all experienced it: either observed as teachers or felt as students. It is that moment when you do not wish to learn what is being taught. It happens when the gap between a student and the world of their class does not seem worth bridging. There can be good reasons: not all students can (or should) learn everything. Some of the most successful students focus on what is important to them. However, there are also many bad reasons. Topics may not be interesting, teaching points may not be (or seem) useful to students' lives outside the class. It might be the day after the exam. Regardless, if students are not connecting, then we have a problem. If we give students something that they do not find relevant, how can they learn from it? In the ESL classroom, I call this the problem of connectivity. I choose this term, instead of 'connectedness', because it is intrinsically connected to mobile technology.

Mobiles: Problem or Solution?

Mobile devices make our students' lives more information-connected; without them, our classes are less student-connected. For this paper, mobiles are defined as smart phones or tablet PCs, though for most ESL students it will mean their smart phone. Mobiles produce almost unlimited, personalised information. Internet searches and Facebook feeds are digitally individualised for each of us, based on previous activity. We record and publish our lives through our mobiles. We even use them to get street directions (yet still teach students asking-for-directions because it is in our course books).

To understand how significant this is for our students, I offer a classroom example. The ubiquitous and undying *New Cutting Edge Intermediate* course book has an activity that asks students to write down the most important object they own, and why it is important to them (Cunningham and Moor, 2005, p. 86) Walk into any class of adult, travelling ESL students in Australia and do this activity with them. Most will say their mobile. Prompt them first with an example about a family heirloom

and the difference will be negligible. Tell them they should choose something other than their mobile and you may even get a sigh of disappointment. Yet many of us ask students to put their mobiles away before they start class. When we ask them to disconnect from their mobiles, we disconnect them from their lives. Of course we need students to focus on learning, but by failing to utilise their favourite device we are deliberately disconnecting our classes from our students.

To make it worse, we then present content to our students that is not personalised for them. Scott Thornbury tells us of the 'predominance towards white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, native-speaking representations' in published ESL course books (Hall, Thornbury, Walter, 2013, 12:58). Materials writers often speak of avoiding taboo topics (Bell and Gower, 2013). How, Thornbury asks, can someone connect with the prescribed questions 'are you married? what do you do? and where do you live?' if their answers are 'I'm gay, unemployed, and live on my parents' couch'? (Hall, Thornbury, Walter, 2013, 12:00). It is difficult for learners to connect with books based on so many assumptions about their lives. What if students were delivered content according to their interests and background? This is where mLearning can be part of the solution.

The Problem of Classroom Waste

We've also all experienced classroom waste. Classroom waste might be going through all 10 questions on the board when only 2 needed checking or it might mean waiting for the number of students who've finished an activity to reach quorum. It could be spending class time on something of no relevance (teaching when you have a connectivity problem). Although it is important to distinguish, at the outset, that pause is not waste: time for reflection, demarcation of lesson stages – even silence – are not problems to be solved. Nor are diversions, off-topic, or off-syllabus discussions. However, if we go through homework just to mark the start of class, or just to make us all feel OK that the answer to question 9 is in fact option c (which we had peer-checked anyway), then we need to wonder if our time couldn't be better spent. That is classroom waste.

Waste is often about time. Time students spend unoccupied (as distinct from reflecting or re-processing) can be waste. Students working on exercises far beyond or below their abilities is usually wasteful. Students bored, waiting for their classmates to catch up can be wasteful. At the Love Learning Conference, Lisa Jane O'Connor challenged us to count the 'wait time' in our classes. Her research team defined wait time as the time students spend waiting for the teacher or for other students. They measured, on average, 90 minutes a day of 'wait time' at a primary school (O'Connor, 2013, 11:55). At the conference itself, attendees were all surprised (and disappointed) at our own estimations of wait time in our classes. Yet the waste goes further than just time. Waste is also about missed learning opportunities. mLearning can help with both.

MLEARNING: AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY

mLearning as a Potential Solution

The potential for mlearning has been recognised in the literature and by educators. The reality of its use, however, is still short of its potential.

It is worth noting that for the first time ever

- students' most important possession is a learning, content consumption and creation device
- our students carry a personalising device whose most successful applications (like Twitter, Angry Birds, and Facebook) use our otherwise wasted, short periods of down-time.

In other words, mobiles are already solving the connectivity and waste problems in our lives outside the classroom. We can transpose that solution into the classroom.

Can mLearning Improve Connectivity?

Open a global ESL course book to any page and you will find professional-quality images that have been selected to sell that book to the world. The images may have been researched with students, they may have been selected by an eye knowledgeable of the global ESL market. Yet open your

students' mobiles and you will instead find amateur-quality images that were taken by them to show their friends (their own personal focus group). Given the choice, which kind of image will students connect with? Ask your students to write a sentence in present continuous (e.g. 'She is eating') about the picture on page 78 and they'll do it because we have trained them to do so. Yet if Ahmed shares a picture with the class from Facebook, you may not even need to ask 'What is he doing?' Student content drives spontaneous response, often creating the 'information gap' teachers can use as a teaching opportunity.

However, there is more to mLearning than just ordaining the benefits of student content. Indeed, equally important to giving students a choice over content is understanding and measuring those choices. Run the activity above and give students a choice of pre-loaded images and student-provided ones. Record what students choose. Record student opinion on the content of their choices. Set some practice as homework and measure student engagement. Check knowledge retention with revision. Compare it all back to the original pre-loaded or class-supplied choice and you have a profile of your learners. The mLearning opportunity is about more than just providing students what they want. It is about us, as teachers, learning what actually works, for which students, and responding accordingly.

Can mLearning Reduce Waste?

When a student passes up a chance to use more challenging language, a learning opportunity is wasted. Sometimes all it takes to save this momentary chance is the teacher's eye contact. Yet as teachers we know that once an activity is started, it is very difficult to see where these chances are being lost. We're conscious of not being lost supporting one group to the detriment of another. Yet we try to engage with individuals enough to make the content and class relevant and interesting. The problem is that we lack information about whom to help and when. If we start a brainstorming activity, we do not know what is written down in student notebooks. If we run an explain-the-word-to-your-partner activity, we do not know what words students are explaining (unless we happen to hear it) or how many they have explained. We're surrounded by student output but it is difficult to sift through it, find the teaching opportunities, and be present when they might go begging.

Students working on mobiles would allow teachers to see these opportunities. Simply seeing what question students are on, and how many questions they have answered would make a difference. A simple teacher's dashboard could show us which students are finishing quickly (and may need more challenging work to reduce wait time), which students are slower (and may need help, possibly from a faster-finishing peer), and advise the teacher when particular students are on a particular question (to find an otherwise lost learning opportunity). The key principle is to give the teacher (and the students) just enough information just in time. Too much information distracts from the class, as does too much functionality in given learning materials or apps. It is difficult to hypothesise exactly what is needed and when. To find this out, we need a methodology like the Lean Startup (Ries, 2011).

LEAN ESL

The Case for Change

The Lean Startup movement has taken the 'startup' business world by storm. It is an evidence-based approach to building a product or service. Traditionally, product building – including course book publishing – is sequential and unwieldy. Course books are based on market research, approved, tendered, written, proofed, designed, and published, before we know whether this research was accurate. Each stage in the publishing process depends largely on the completion of the previous one. And it is often difficult or impossible for revelations in later stages to feed back into the assumptions of initial ones. Getting through the entire process takes a long time. Nick Robinson of Eltjam tells us we are lucky if we get it all done in a year (Robinson, July 2013). Indeed, Jan Bell and Roger Gower relied on their own expertise because they simply did not have time to use the feedback from their pilots (Bell and Gower, 2011). Further, what if the graphics chosen do not sell? What if the market says it wants a book that another publisher releases halfway through the process? What if the content

does not have product-market fit? The budget will still be spent and the book still printed. The publishing team will no longer be together – if it ever completely existed at any one point in the process.

There is a faster, more market-responsive, and less risky way. Using the principles of Lean Startup, and powered by the speed of mobile content-delivery, a course book could be built in smaller pieces, and tested along the way. Student and teacher responses could drive a better product-market fit. Content could be more relevant.

Lean Methodology in ESL

A requirement of Lean is getting a small version of a product developed quickly. You use this ‘minimal’ product to test the market and measure their response. This allows you to validate your ideas for little cost, as quickly as possible.

Say a publisher has an idea that the world needs a social media English course book, so ESL speakers can understand Facebook and Twitter. The traditional approach would require expensive (and theoretical) market research before this idea could be tested. A Lean approach would be to write a single activity. Put it into a class and get real feedback. If the activity works at most schools, the idea is tested and appears correct. If it fails then your assumptions may be wrong. Write another activity based on what you learnt, or re-work the original. Continue iterating until you have enough market validation and content to publish your entire book. If content is not relevant – if it fails the connectivity test – then discard or revise it. If content is too difficult or easy – if it fails the waste test – then do the same.

Of course it is a big jump from activity, to chapter, to book. It is also expensive for publishers to maintain the publishing team while they iterate through increasingly bigger (though thankfully de-risked) cycles. So the process has to be as ‘lean’ as possible. Publishing in this iterative manner allows you to produce what is necessary for the success of the product, and only what is necessary. Every aspect is tested along the way. Graphics or no graphics, topical quote or not, song activity or not? These alternatives can be tested against each other and their results compared. This can’t be done with sub-standard materials – such a test would not prove anything – rather the principle is to test minor (but sometimes costly) differences between materials. This ‘A/B testing’ is used widely in the technology business world. Nick Robinson suggests that this way we can avoid building a course book where 20% of the content is responsible for 80% of its success – a different form of waste (Robinson, August 2013). So the publishing team may be more diverse (even more expensive) but it is also more focussed and more responsive. The costs for publishers in moving to mobiles could be minimised with the Lean Startup approach.

CONCLUSION

Connectivity is a growing problem in our classes. Waste is a constant concern. Mobiles delivering personalised, unlimited content to – and from – our students can help reduce both. Materials development can be done using the Lean Startup approach, which can make the publishing process more efficient. This can offer us all better, customised ESL materials that continuously improve over time.

REFERENCES

- Bell, J. and Gower, R., 2011, ‘Writing course materials for the world: a great compromise’ in Tomlinson, B., ed., *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, 2nd edn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 135-150.
- Cunningham, S. and Moor, P., 2005, *New Cutting Edge Intermediate Students’ Book*, 2nd edn, Pearson Education Limited, Essex.
- Hall, G., (chair), Thornbury, S., Walter, C., IATEFL 2013, ELT Journal Signature Event - Published course materials don’t reflect the lives or needs of learners, viewed 7 July 2013, <http://bit.ly/ZVtMXn>.

- Harrison, N., 'Lean ELT Publishing (or, How to publish an ELT course in three months, Part 2)', *Eltjam*, viewed 17 July 2013, <http://www.eltjam.com/lean-elt-publishing-or-how-to-publish-an-elt-course-in-three-months-part-2/>.
- O'Connor, L. J., Love Learning Conference, Personalised Learning, viewed 1 September 2013, <http://bit.ly/Gzz9pl>.
- Ries, E., 2011, *The Lean Startup*, Crown Business, USA.
- Robinson, N., July 2013, 'Agile ELT (or, How to publish an ELT course in three months, Part 1)', *Eltjam*, viewed 17 July 2013, <http://www.eltjam.com/agile-elt-or-how-to-publish-an-elt-course-in-three-months-part-1/>.
- Robinson, N., August 2013, 'The Pareto Principle: what we could, and should, leave out of ELT products', *Eltjam*, viewed 1 September 2013, <http://www.eltjam.com/the-pareto-principle-what-we-could-and-should-leave-out-of-elt-products/>.