A Feasibility Study for Developing E-Training on English Courses under a Collaborative Project between Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand and Massey University, New Zealand

Sirirat Wipassilapa
Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University ◆ Thailand ◆ sirirat.wip@stou.ac.th

ABSTRACT

The general purpose of the research was to arrange a feasibility study for developing e-training models on English language courses through a collaborative project between Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU),Thailand and Massey University, New Zealand. The specific purposes were (1) to test the effectiveness of a prototype program, IMMEDIATE, used in the training environment (2) to investigate the management feasibility and the marketing feasibility of English e-training courses (3) to propose suitable models to organize English e-training courses for STOU.

There were three important stages in the research. (1) The effectiveness of the prototype program was tested four times at STOU, testing without learners the first time, and testing three times with learners. (2) Twelve officers from related offices were invited to a focus group to share their comments on the feasibility of e-training program management. One thousand questionnaires were sent to target groups. A cost analysis and break-even point for organizing the e-training course were also calculated. (3) The e-training models were synthesized. The data were analyzed using frequency distribution, percentage, average, standard deviation and content analysis.

The results were as follows: (1) The overall effectiveness assessment of "IMMEDIATE" based on the volunteer comments was that it worked fine, but there may be difficulties in the first use. After users were familiar with the program, it could be used easily. The participants agreed that the content and all activities in the English trial lesson were interesting. It also

A Feasibility Study for Developing E-Training on English Courses under a
Collaborative Project between Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University,
Thailand and Massey University, New Zealand

ASEAN Journal of Open Distance Learning
◆ Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013)

helped them to improve their English language skills in speaking, reading, listening and writing. (2) The management feasibility study and marketing feasibility study for the English e-training course found that it was possible to manage a collaborative project between STOU and Massey University, due to various supporting factors. The marketing feasibility study found that the target groups were interested in attending the course at medium and high levels for 81 percent of 770 respondents. The results of cost analysis and break-even point showed that the cost per two-month course with 100 participants will be 903,462 baht and the break-even point for the registration fee will be 9,034.62 baht per person. (3) The appropriate e-training models that should be introduced were non-profit training courses for the first phase and for-profit training courses for the later phase.

INTRODUCTION

The role of English in Thailand is quite important as it is in other developing countries. New technology and the widespread of using internet have resulted in major transition in terms of sciences, education, business, and technological progress. As a result, the Thai government has a policy to develop English teaching courses at all levels, countrywide, in order to increase its population's knowledge and communication skills. Even though all Thai students have to take English as a compulsory course from primary to university level, according to the national curriculum, the survey results found that most graduates from every level lack all four primary skills in communication. (Education First, 2012) At the same time, many organizations in Thailand require numerous employees who have a good command of English. Several companies and institutions in both public and private sectors have conducted English training programs to improve their personnel's English skills. Moreover, a number of government and private universities organize English courses or provide both short and long English training programs for their students, employees and anyone interested in improving their English proficiency. STOU, which is the first open university in Thailand, also has English courses available for selection and also compulsory English courses as part of other programs of the university. An average of 10,000 students per year have enrolled in these English courses showing that a high number of learners are interested in taking these kinds of remote lessons but the government and private universities cannot serve their needs (Vanijdee A., et al. 2005). Therefore, at present, computer technology advancement has been employed for various e-learning subjects, including English. In that research English teaching websites were divided into 5 groups, as follows: 1) General ESL Websites. These websites provide teaching and learning of general English lessons. 2) Language Practice Sites. These websites are for learners to practice their English skills. 3) Teaching Resources Sites. These websites are for teachers and anyone interested in English. They collect English teaching materials of various topics that teachers can use for their lessons or for learners who want to improve themselves with practice. 4) Content Sites. These websites have news reports and contents of several topics as well as English exercises. 5) University Language Centre Sites. These websites belong to universities or institutions for online English teaching. Some websites are free of charge but others require interested people to pay a tuition fee when registering. Thomson (2008) studied on the topic of human learning through

online communities and suggested that in order to develop an online community which promotes a formal learning environment, clear learning objectives must be set and curriculum development must be deliberately designed. By doing this, members of the online community would learn and achieve the objectives. In Thailand, learners who need improve their English proficiency would choose to enroll in either government or private institutions or learn through various media. Well-off parents would send their children to study English in English-speaking countries during the summer or join a language and cultural exchange program for one year. When children join such a program, they would have a good opportunity to use everyday English and learn the culture with native speakers in an English speaking environment, which is consistent with modern learning principles. Children or learners will be able to communicate in English more fluently and will continuously improve their English skills. (AFS, 2008 and AYC, 2008) In addition to that, Kongsema (2009) did research on the topic of English communication proficiency of private university students majoring in tourism in metropolitan Bangkok and suggested various ways of teaching and learning English. Firstly, students should have more practice time, not only inside but also outside the classroom. In terms of textbooks and learning materials, English instructors should carefully consider suitable texts that promote the development of English for everyday communication skills. They need to prepare up-to-date teaching materials in order to truly improve students' learning effectiveness. Moreover, according to the questionnaire asking thirty STOU students and non-STOU students who contacted the university in September 2008 about their interest in learning English to improve themselves informally, all participants were interested in an English course with different learning objectives. They also suggested training method, as follows: 1) Training in the classroom for one week. 2) STOU remote training for 4 months. 3) E-training for 4 months. This reveals that English training is needed among STOU students and non-STOU students, if the university can provide a course that responds to their needs. It must be a course that can improve students' communication skills in English, so that they can use English in their daily lives. One special feature of the course is that technology is used in conducting the lessons so learners can communicate with English native speakers without travelling abroad. As a result, learners can save both their time and money. An alternative way of doing this is by collaborating with universities in English speaking countries to develop an e-training course, thereby meeting the learners' needs at a reasonable cost. Such a course would be popular and beneficial for the learners. Besides this, STOU has good potential to provide collaborative training with universities in English speaking countries as the university has been credited with providing remote education for several decades.

By doing research at Massey University in New Zealand, the researcher had an opportunity to work with Dr. Russell Johnson, who developed the prototype program called IMMEDIATE for the purpose of distance education. It is a program that has been designed to be user-friendly without relying on a high technology. The computers do not need to be connected to a high speed computer network while students are learning or doing learning activities. (Johnson R., et al, 2006) Therefore, the researcher was interested in developing an e-training program for English through a collaborative project between STOU and Massey University. It will be an alternative choice for Thai learners who want to study with English native speakers; moreover, they can choose to study at a convenient time and place, without spending a great deal of money on going abroad. As e-training has progressed enormously, for English courses, learners have an opportunity to practice their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills with authentic learning. The important factor of authentic learning focuses on learners being able to

A Feasibility Study for Developing E-Training on English Courses under a
Collaborative Project between Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University,
Thailand and Massey University, New Zealand

ASEAN Journal of Open Distance Learning
◆ Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013)

use English in their daily lives. Besides this, it is a good way for STOU to establish a network of collaboration by providing English e-training courses or other courses with other universities in the English speaking countries in the future.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research was divided into three phases. The first phase was to test the effectiveness of a prototype program used in the training environment. The second phase was to investigate the management feasibility and the marketing feasibility. The third phase was to synthesize English e-training models suitable for STOU.

The Scope of the Research

(1) IMMEDIATE, developed by Dr. Russell Johnson of Massey University, New Zealand, was the prototype program used in the training.

(2) The content used in testing the effectiveness of IMMEDIATE covered all four communication skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. It was taken from unit three, Managing Problems in Conversation, of the English for Communication in Everyday Life, the material for face-to-face of STOU English training course and developed as an experimental English e-training course by the cooperation of the University Study Preparation and English Learning Centre of Massey University.

(3) The English e-training system development was only done to the point of analyzing the system factors, then synthesizing the data in order to design the training system. The following stages of constructing, experimenting and evaluating the system were not done.

Research Instruments

(1)   The research instruments used to test the effectiveness of the IMMEDIATE prototype program during the first phase were:

   (a)   The IMMEDIATE prototype program used for the training

   (b)   English e-training lessons used as examples in testing the effectiveness of the IMMEDIATE prototype program

   (c)   English for speakers of other languages: ESOL lesson evaluation form

   (d)   Evaluation form for the IMMEDIATE prototype program

(2)   The research instruments used during the second phase, the study of the management feasibility and the marketing feasibility were:

   (a)   The seminar record form for the focus group of the officers involved in the training.

   (b)   Questionnaires for opinions of an English e-training program under collaboration between STOU and Massey University.

(3)   The research instrument used during the third phase, the synthesis of an English e-training models suitable for STOU was: The evaluation form of the effectiveness of the training system and e-training models.

Data Collection

(1) For the first phase, the researcher coordinated with Dr. Russell Johnson, the co-researcher from Massey University, in order to test the effectiveness of the IMMEDIATE prototype program at STOU. The test was done four times. The first one was on September 24-28, 2009 without learners. The next tests took place on December 21-25, 2009; January 18-22, 2010; and January 18-20, 2011 with 5, 14 and 5 volunteers respectively.

(2) For the second phase, the management feasibility was investigated by a focus group sharing their comments. They were 12 officers from various units of STOU: International Affairs Unit, the Office of Continuing Education, the Office of Computer Services and the Office of Educational Technology. The marketing feasibility was investigated by mailing 1,000 questionnaires to target groups including 400 randomly sampled from the list of people who attended various programs provided by the Office of Continuing Education and 600 randomly sampled from the list of graduates and current STOU students. A cost analysis and a break-even point for organizing the e-training course were also calculated.

(3) For the third phase, an e-training system was synthesized and then the e-training models were analyzed. The specialists in e-learning would observe the demonstration of IMMEDIATE and comment on the appropriateness of the prototype program, focusing on its effectiveness, which was a very important element of the training system and e-training models.

Data Analysis and Statistics Used

The data was analyzed using IOC (The index of item-objective congruence), frequency distribution, percentage, average, standard deviation, break-even point analysis and content analysis.

<div align="center">

RESEARCH RESULTS

</div>

(1) When testing the effectiveness of IMMEDIATE used in the e-training with the network system of STOU, it was found that the program could not be connected with users outside of the university network. It might be because of the university security system, so permissions had to be asked for before testing the program on each occasion. The overall assessment of the effectiveness of IMMEDIATE, based on volunteer comments, was that it worked fine, but there may be some difficulties in initial use. After the users were familiar with the program, they could use the program easily. However, it also had numerous flaws that should be improved; such as the time-consuming log-in, complicated functions and the program halting for unknown reasons and the users not being able to go back to the point it stopped when they reopened it. In terms of the contents of the English e-training course, the participants agreed that its contents and all activities were interesting. It also helped them to improve their English language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Suggestions were given to

improve the course. Suggestions included: the contents and assessments for each lesson should be in the same place at the end of the lessons; in listening and conversation mode, there should be 'pause' and 'resume' buttons with the counter number; and the help system for explanation of vocabulary is very useful but a Thai version should be added to increase learners' understanding.

With regard to the consideration of the training program's appropriateness, five specialists on e-learning unanimously agreed on the appropriateness of the system as there was space for instructors and learners to work together. There were also tools to support automatic filing, so instructors could log in to check and control the filing system. Regarding the communication system, the instructors could send lessons or assignments to the learners and vice versa and there was a system to support various kinds of communication. For the record of learners' logging-in, there was a system that helped the instructors to track the learners in order to monitor their progress in learning, keep log-in records for learners and update learners' information. For the instruction and evaluation system, both the instructors and learners could ask questions of one another, send messages, and chat; besides this, the instructors could put the learners into groups in order to assign them to work together. For other special features of the program, there was a manual available to promptly assist the learner at every step of using the program. Multimedia lessons could be saved on a flash drive or CD-ROM instead of being downloaded, so the problems of low speed internet could be overcome. Users could use the program without having to install it onto their computers as the program could work using a minimum of Windows XP operating system. There was a Walkie Talkie conversation program which solved the problem of low bandwidth, a color system to trace the learners' learning progress and a help system throughout the program. The components of IMMEDIATE are student learning appliance, authoring and teaching module, software developers' toolkit and content management module as shown in Figure 1.
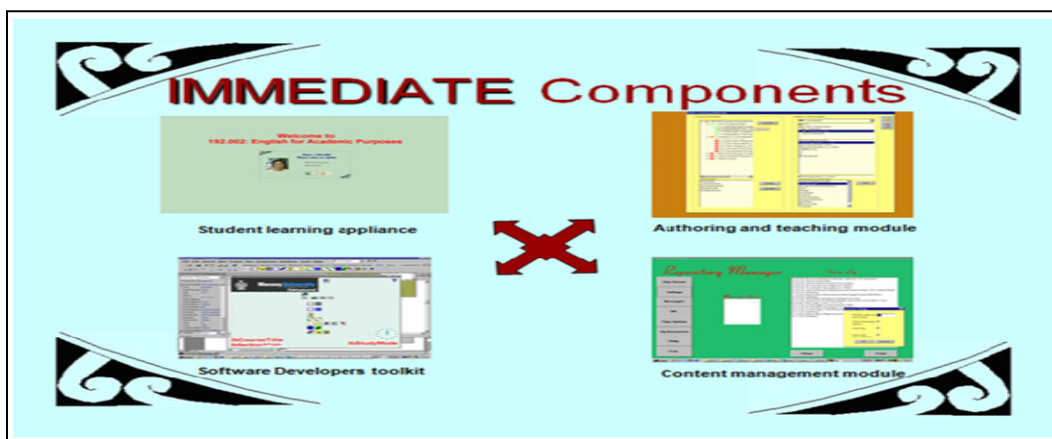

Figure 1: The Components of IMMEDIATE

(2) The study of management and marketing feasibility of the English e-training course can be concluded as follows:

Regarding management feasibility, it was found that the management of the collaborative project on English language e-training course between STOU and Massey University was feasible as there were various supporting features. Firstly the program

IMMEDIATE itself was very efficient in English language training. Additionally, there was the Office of Continuing Education, the main unit responsible for the training; the STOU International Affairs Unit, coordinating between STOU and Massey University; the Office of Computer Services, providing space on its servers and coordinating with the software development team to enable it to run on Windows and Linux platforms; and the Office of Educational Technology, supporting the production of English lessons for e-training. The results of marketing feasibility study were as follows:

(1) According to the questionnaires asking the target group of 770 respondents, 81 percent of them were interested in attending the course at medium and high levels as they would like to improve their speaking, listening, writing and reading skills as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The number of the respondents who would like to improve
four primary skills in English

Skill needed to improve	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Neutral	Somewhat unlikely	No response
Listening	314	230	88	78	60
Speaking	265	326	84	64	31
Reading	61	117	371	146	75
Writing	96	54	142	400	78

The objectives of the respondents for learning English were to increase their English language knowledge, to communicate in their daily lives, to work effectively, to further their study at the graduate level, to get ready for an English test or to get a scholarship to study abroad. Their objectives for learning English was shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The objectives for learning English of the respondents

The objectives for learning English	Number
to increase their English language knowledge	625
to communicate in their daily lives	539
to work effectively	512
to further their study	190
to get ready for an English test i.e. TOEFL, IELTS, etc.	137
to get a scholarship to study abroad	41

The period of time which the respondents preferred to attend the training course were 1-2 months, 2-3 months and 3-4 months as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The duration of training course which the respondents preferred

The duration of training course	Number	Percentage
1-2 months	362	47.01
2-3 months	238	30.91
3-4 months	140	18.18
no response	30	3.90

A Feasibility Study for Developing E-Training on English Courses under a
Collaborative Project between Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University,
Thailand and Massey University, New Zealand

ASEAN Journal of Open Distance Learning
◆ Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013)

(2) The results of a cost and break-even point analysis of the collaborative e-training program showed that the cost per course with 50 participants would be a total amount of 567,412 baht. The break-even point for the registration fee would be 11,288 baht per person. For 100 participants per course, the cost would be a total amount of 903,462 baht and the break - even point for the registration fee would be 9,034.62 baht per person. The length of training time was two months.

(3)There were two suitable e-training models based on systematic approaches for STOU. The first model at the initial phase was for non-profit training courses and for profit training courses at the later phase. There were four important elements for e-training system such as input, process, output and feedback.

DISCUSSION

(1) Once flaws had been removed from the prototype, the test of effectiveness of the IMMEDIATE program used for e-training in English language at STOU revealed that in general the program worked to an acceptable standard. However, since the program could not be connected with the STOU network because of limitations of the program and the STOU security system, it could not work to its full capacity. Aspects of the program requiring improvement include: the speed of logging in to the program, reducing the complexity of its menu and eliminating the frequent 'crashes' of the program. Nonetheless, the effectiveness testing found that the program could respond to the intended objectives in terms of delivering remote training for individuals, as it proved to be user friendly. Additionally, users don't have to be particularly skillful with computers and advanced technology and high speed computers are not needed in running the program. Since learners do not have to use high speed computers when learning or doing activities prepared in the program, the limitation concerning download time has been reduced (Johnson R., et al, 2006). The prototype program still needs improvement, so the experiment of the program with learners in the target country provides the programmers with useful information in program development. As a result, the program can be developed to truly respond to the needs of the learners regarding remote learning.

In respect to the sample contents of the English course used for testing the effectiveness of the prototype program, the participants agreed that the contents and activities of the lessons were interesting and assisted them in improving their communicative skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. The outstanding aspect of the program is that the learners have an opportunity to study lessons prepared by native speakers of English and the program developers, who are instructors from the University Study Preparation and English Learning Centre at Massey University and are experienced in the English for Speakers of Other Languages program. However, the English e-training lessons for Thai learners need adjusting to suit the Thai environment, as suggested by experts in teaching and learning English from universities and English language teaching centers in Thailand. This is consistent with the opinions of the participants in testing the effectiveness of the program. STOU has a system to produce teaching and learning materials in the form of a committee. They are responsible for the content experts, an educational technology expert, and educational assessment expert. If STOU provides an e-learning program for an English language training course under

a collaborative project with Massey University, it can comfortably apply that system to manage this e-training course production.

(2) The study of management and marketing feasibilities of an English e-training course under a collaborative project between STOU and Massey University, New Zealand.

The study of management feasibility

The results of the focus group seminar involving officers from various units of STOU showed that this project is feasible. The Office of Continuing Education would be the main agency responsible for the project. The International Affairs Unit would coordinate with Massey University for the establishment of an academic MOU. The Office of Computer Services would provide space on its servers to place e-training software modules and support the connection of IMMEDIATE to the computer network system of STOU. The Office of Continuing Education has first-hand experience in organizing several training courses in response to the needs of particular target groups and has developed e-training courses before (Piyakhun M. and Learttanapon L., 2008). As a result, it should lead the development of the English language e-training materials under a collaborative project, in order to expand the capacity to provide academic services.

The study of marketing feasibility

In order to find out the needs of the target group, 1,000 questionnaires were mailed, of which 770 were returned. It was found that the respondents were interested in attending the course at a medium to high level of 81 percent; necessitating that the training course be organized according to their needs. The results of cost analysis and break-even point analysis of the e-training program revealed that running an e-training course for two months, with 50 participants, would cost a total amount of 567,412 baht. The break-even point for the registration fee would be 11,288 baht per person. For 100 participants per course, the cost would cost a total of 903,462 baht and the break-even point would be 9,034.62 baht per person. According to the respondents' opinions, 15 percent suggested that the tuition fee for the one month or two months course should be around 1,000 – 1,500 baht, whereas 64 per-cent did not express their opinion on the issue of tuition fees, which may have resulted from insufficient information on the course, leading to a lack of comments on this matter. Regarding tuition fees, the two universities need to hold further discussions and sharing of ideas in the future.

Suggestions for suitable training models for STOU

The synthesis of the English e-training system under a collaborative project between STOU and Massey University, New Zealand consists of four important elements; input, process, output and feedback. The input, which is vital for the e-training project, is the prototype IMMEDIATE program developed by Dr. Russell Johnson. This program has a number of strengths worthy of note. This remote education training program is easy for individuals to use and it can be used online or offline without the need for high speed computers. However, there are some areas for additional development of the prototype program according to outcomes of the program's effectiveness testing and opinions of the e-learning experts. As a result, the e-training program must be further developed to work effectively and to reach its full capacity in a real learning environment before STOU can organize the English e-training course. Once this has been completed, subsequent stages in the project can proceed. However, the universities should think

A Feasibility Study for Developing E-Training on English Courses under a
Collaborative Project between Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University,
Thailand and Massey University, New Zealand

ASEAN Journal of Open Distance Learning
◆ Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013)

about using other learning management system such as Moodle which has been implemented within both universities. The two universities can arrange the academic MOU to clearly identify their roles to promote working cooperation. In terms of suitable training models, the first model at the initial phase should be non-profit training courses and profit training courses at a later phase, providing the program gains the appropriate level of popularity.

CONCLUSION

This study is part of an initiative to find a possible way of collaboration between STOU and universities in English speaking countries. As a consequence, STOU could expand the educational opportunities and choices for Thais who would like to improve their English skills for communication in the era of globalization. Since Thai is the official language in Thailand, its people don't have much chance to use English on a daily basis. This is an important reason why they generally lack English communication skills. It is very clear that English language is playing a major role in the process of globalization. Furthermore, Thailand, as a member of ASEAN and the future ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, sees the necessity for Thai people to improve their English communication skills so that they are as skillful as citizens of other ASEAN member countries. Enhancing workforce skills and increasing innovation is part of Thailand strategy to move to a more knowledge-intensive, creative economy and employment-producing higher incomes and competitiveness. The ability of Thai people to acquire and utilize skills will influence both the competitiveness of the economy and equity among society. This raises the bar for Thailand's education and training systems. STOU, which has provided distance education for some time, should be the leader in developing English language teaching and training, using the latest technology in response to the needs of a wide target group. The university should constantly support the research and development of the e-training course in order to find a way to fully improve the training system. Following from this, a collaborative project between universities could be established and brought into existence in the near future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

AFS (2008) *'AFS Thailand'* Retrieved on Jul 25, 2008 from www.afsthailand.org

AYC (2008) *'AYC Intercultural Programs Thailand'* Retrieved on Jul 25, 2008 from www.aycthailand.com

Johnson, R., et al. (2006) *The Learning Computer: a low Bandwidth tool for bridging the digital divide in distance education*. Paper presented at the TEDC 2006 – The 4th International Workshop on Technology for Education in Developing Countries at Iringa, Tanzania

Kongsema, K. (2010). *The Communication Ability in English of Bachelor Degree Students of Private University in Bangkok Who Study on the Area of Tourism* Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khonkhan University, Vol 27 May-August, 2010: 99-118.

Education First (2012) "English Proficiency Index" Retrieved on Oct 11, 2012 from http:// www.ef.co.th/epi/download-full-report/.

Piyakhun, M. and Learttanapon, S. (2008). *The Development of eTraining Course for The Leader.* Retrieved on Dec 29, 2010 from http://www.stou.ac.th/Offices/ord/Research/Uploads/%

Thomson, T. (2008) *Learning in online communities: An array of spaces and places.* Paper presented at the 2008 AERA Annual Meeting in New York City, USA.

Vanijdee A., et al (2005) *The Feasibility Study for Opening Undergraduate Program in English Area.* A research report of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Nonthaburi, Thailand.