

Developing and Evaluating Online Curriculum for Volunteer ESL Teachers

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1. Introduction

Every year, over ten thousand individuals complete English language teaching certificates from a variety of institutions (Hobbs, 2013; Brandt, 2006; Hall & Knox, 2009; Perraton, 1995). As the need for capable English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers continues to grow, so does the need for the creation and implementation of training programs that fit the unique needs of each context. This is especially true of volunteer teachers who, because of serious constraints of time, distance, finances, and resources, often rely on altruism and native speaker intuition rather than theoretical and pedagogical training (Gilbertson, 2000; Jakubiak, 2012). Despite these limitations, preparation for such volunteer teachers can be provided through online curricula that respond to specific situations and constraints.

These unique circumstances often require teachers to consider what “is most suitable in their professional judgment for a given situation” (Brown, 1995, p. 19). Because all teaching contexts are unique, it may be in the best interest of the teachers, students, and administrators for the institution to develop a curriculum that appropriately responds to the specific context. In order to create a context-based online curriculum for volunteer ESL teachers, developers may benefit from familiarizing themselves with existing programs that respond to similar needs, the general principles of instructional design, and the research surrounding online distance learning.

One of the most prevalent theories surrounding online distance education is transactional distance (TD), which was developed by Boyd and Apps (1980) and further researched and advanced by Moore (1993). TD is used to describe the combination of psychological and geographical distance felt by both the teachers and students (Reyes, 2013; Wengrowicz & Offir,

2013), which is associated with “gaps in understanding and communication between teachers and learners” (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). This lack of connection and understanding can be demotivating for students and potentially affect their performance in the course and their ability to apply the material. Because of these concerns, researchers have focused on three dimensions that can influence this perceived distance and mitigate the potentially negative impacts of TD: structure, dialogue, and autonomy. The context of every distance learning situation needs to guide the developers in designing the online curriculum and analyzing the balance of these three aspects of TD (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

This article combines the relevant research surrounding basic ESL teacher training and online education with insight from the development of an online training program for volunteer teachers. These experiences demonstrate the process of creating and using an online program over the course of more than a year to train four small groups of volunteer ESL teachers, most of whom had limited prior teaching experience. The research and suggestions for application provided are intended to help other institutions looking to provide similar training for volunteer teachers in their respective programs.

2. Review of Literature

The number of volunteer ESL/EFL teachers involved in programs worldwide continues to increase. In fact, an estimated 37% of all volunteer tourism projects are connected to teaching (Jakubiak, 2012). The high demand for native speaking ESL/EFL teachers has led to the involvement of large numbers of volunteers who are willing to assist in teaching for a short period of time. These volunteers frequently have little to no training in how to provide this service and rely instead on the desire to help those they deem to be in need (Hobbs, 2013; Gilbertson, 2000). Because of this training gap, certification programs have been developed to

provide a basic toolkit that “seeks to serve the initial needs of novice teachers” (Hobbs, 2013, p. 172).

Creating online ESL teacher training using this toolkit allows institutions to respond to the unique demands of volunteers by allowing flexibility where many certification programs do not. For example, one certification program requires “130 hours of tutor contact, including 90 hours of lectures, workshops, and guided individual and group work” combined with the observation of “experienced teachers for four hours and engag[ing] in six hours of supervised teaching practice” (Hobbs, 2013, p. 165). This would be appropriate for many ESL teachers, but would be burdensome and excessive for volunteer teachers in other contexts. Some researchers have argued that, “discontinuity between these academic content courses and the language classroom appears to set up a gap that cannot be bridged by beginning teacher learners” (Tarone & Allwright, 2005, p. 12). Therefore, while such a comprehensive curriculum might be admirable and even necessary for aspiring ESL teachers, it may not appropriately address the needs of volunteers who face financial, time, distance, and resource constraints.

The adjustments curriculum developers include and emphasize in context-specific training are especially important since often “there are no requirements, beyond the desire to serve, for filling a teaching role within a volunteer-based organization” (Gilbertson, 2000, p. 40). Arnold and Ducate (2006) state that these preparation programs ought to require, “reflection, opportunities to apply theory to real-life situations, and a network for the exchange of ideas and support” (p. 42). This focus on the practical application of theoretical principles can better emphasize the real needs of a volunteer context and bridge the gap described by Tarone and Allwright (2005). Therefore, curriculum developed to meet the needs of these volunteers must keep the content relevant and accessible to the target audience.

2.1 Curriculum Design. Before discussing the structure and content of the curriculum, it is important to define curriculum and consider the common models of curriculum development. The definition of curriculum is nebulous and not frequently articulated explicitly in the existing literature. Building on the work of Rodgers (1989), Nation and Macalister (2010), Christison and Murray (2014), we define curriculum as:

A dynamic, context-dependent process and product that is based on the observed needs and educational philosophies of the stakeholders (e.g. teachers, students, community).

The curriculum goals, objectives, and purposes are clearly articulated, implemented, and evaluated in order to meet the needs of the learning context.

Although there are a variety of models used to express the process of curriculum design, the ADDIE model is commonly used in instructional design. This term emerged shortly after World War II and is “an umbrella term that refers to a family of models that share a common underlying structure” (Molenda, 2015, p. 40). The model acronym stands for the following parts: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. This means that the process includes a thorough analysis of the environment, an inventory of the needs of all stakeholders, and a review of existing curricula similar to the one proposed; the creation of a design that fits the context and is based on the needs analysis; the development of the content and structure; the actual implementation of the curriculum with the target learners; and an evaluation of the curriculum at each stage of development and of any revisions that are made based on the realities of the implementation.

In addition to the basic concepts of ADDIE, Gustafson and Branch (2011) suggest that an effective instructional design should also be: learner-centered, goal-oriented, focused on real-world performance, driven by reliable and valid outcomes, empirical, and a team effort.

The principles used in the development of the curriculum discussed in this article are drawn from Nation and Macalister (2010), ADDIE, and the six components mentioned by Gustafson and Branch (2011). Although variations of the ADDIE model suggest a degree of sequence, the reality is that “the process is complex, iterative, and dynamic, and cycles through its various components” (Christison & Murray, 2014, p. 52).

2.2 Distance Education and Transactional Distance. With the advent of the Internet and other technologies that have improved the ease of communication, distance education has become commonplace in many disciplines and at different levels. Moore and Kearsley (2005) define this form of education as “planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies, and special organizational and administrative arrangements” (p. 2). Because the design and manner of providing the information is different than in a traditional classroom, it follows that the application of the ADDIE model to the development of a distance learning program that is technology-mediated takes on an additional level of complexity. This difference is most easily noted in the need to consider TD in the process of developing a curriculum.

TD theory has been the focus of much research in the field of distance education for the last two decades. The research indicates that in order to decrease the perceived distance and increase the understanding between teacher, student, and peers, curriculum developers need to consider the three aspects of structure, dialogue, and autonomy (Andrade & Bunker, 2010; Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Wengrowicz & Offir, 2013). However, in spite of this agreement on the importance of TD, one of the greatest critiques of the theory is the lack of clearly operationalized definitions of the three features (McBrien, Jones, & Cheng, 2009; Reyes,

2013; Wengrowicz & Offir, 2013). Thus, a clarification of these terms as they apply to the curriculum discussed in this article, as well as examples of how to apply them each to the actual development of online training for novice ESL teachers are provided.

2.3 Structure. The notion of structure is fairly clear in most interpretations of the theory and is familiar to teachers across disciplines and contexts. Structure refers to the rigidity of the course in terms of organization, presentation, and assessment. This means that structure is determined by the “objectives, assignments, due dates, textbook, schedule, and other organizational elements” (Andrade & Bunker, 2010, p. 114). If the structure of a course does not allow for flexibility or adaptation for an individual or a particular group participating in the course, students will report a higher degree of transactional distance. According to Andrade and Bunker (2009), structure is about the accommodation of learners’ preferences and needs when designing a course, or adjusting factors to minimize the negative impacts of TD.

There have been different approaches to measuring the effect of structure on TD. Some researchers have measured it using student ratings of the motivational, technical and instructional support (Benton, Li, Gross, & Pallett, 2013), while others focus on the “seemingly objective characteristics of the course” like time, organization of the content, and the assignments (Wengrowicz & Offir, 2013). Until further research is conducted to see if one of these forms of measurement is preferable, it would be wise to consider structure from both the subjective and objective perspectives. The distinction between structure and dialogue seems to also be blurred in the literature because they are fundamentally interconnected, and adjusting one will often affect the other (Reyes, 2013).

2.4 Dialogue. Dialogue is the term Moore (1993) uses to describe the interactions that take place within the course and some studies have shown that there is an inverse relationship

between dialogue and transactional distance (Bischoff et al., 1996). This interaction is further defined by other researchers as including four types of dialogue: learner to instructor (L-I), learner to learner (L-L), learner to content (L-C), and learner to technology (L-T) (McBrien & Jones, 2009; Reyes, 2013; Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014). While the first three forms of interaction are not unique to distance learning alone, the lack of a physical classroom and face-to-face (F2F) communication requires these forms of interaction to be provided in a different way. For example, online learning allows for the simulation of F2F interaction through discussion boards and video conferencing (Arnold & Ducate, 2006). There is also an aspect of messaging and submitting assignments and receiving feedback with relative ease through the different learning management systems, which “can bridge the feeling of separation” (Wengrowicz & Offir, 2013, p. 118). The use of these communication tools can therefore reduce the perceived transactional distance between L-I and L-L (Kamhi-Stein, 2000), which are generally the interactions with which most developers are concerned.

Additionally, the learner to content factor of dialogue is important to consider, and some researchers have suggested that it is equally important to L-I interaction and more important than L-L interaction (Conrad, 2002; Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014). Essentially, the transactional distance can increase if students are left with reading text after text. It can decrease, however, through the use of tools such as PowerPoint, screencasting, video clips, podcasts, and other forms of media to break up the transfer of information. Finally, the L-T dialogue can impact TD as it can be intimidating and distancing for individuals in the course who are less familiar and comfortable with the use of technology, although research suggests that it has little impact on the students’ overall success and the achievement of the learning outcomes (Ekwunife-Orakwue &

Teng, 2014). This type of interaction can be improved by training students to use the technology effectively so that it does not distract from or impede the intended dialogue.

2.5 Autonomy. Learner autonomy is a concept that explains the student's role in the learning process and the motivation and determination to thrive in a learning environment where so much depends on the learner's initiative. Andrade and Bunker (2009) state that it "is connected to learner choice and can be extended to various aspects of a distance course, such as selection of materials and activities, individual goal setting, self-pacing, and self-evaluation" (p. 49). Therefore, autonomy is also directly impacted by the level of rigidity in the structure of the curriculum and the quantity and quality of dialogue. For example, Arnold and Ducate (2006) suggest that the use of communicative tools, such as discussion boards, increase dialogue and collaboration, as well as promote learner autonomy.

On the other hand, according to Andrade and Bunker (2010), "when structure and dialogue are high, the 'transactional distance' between the learner and the teacher decrease, and the level of autonomy decreases" (p. 114). As evidenced by this statement, the lowering of TD by focusing on structure and dialogue can have a negative impact on autonomy. In order to balance the interplay among these components, the curriculum designers should create opportunities in the structure for learners to exercise the ability to choose. Another example of a way to decrease TD is for developers to include metacognitive tasks that allow the learners to reflect on their own experience with learning a language and then apply that reflection to the creation of lesson plans and activities. These tasks allow students to personalize a required task by self-evaluating and then generating a product that is unique from what others may submit.

When considering how to balance the three aspects of transactional distance in online distance learning for volunteer teachers, developers need to begin by considering the context.

Transactional distance can be reduced by keeping the learning context in mind and establishing structure, dialogue, and autonomy in a way that is unique and appropriate for that setting (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009). For example, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) concluded that low dialogue and structure is adequate when there is low transactional distance, such as in an on-campus, enhanced classroom, while higher levels of dialogue and structure are required in a transnational, off-campus, wholly online context. Therefore, while one curriculum design would be successful in one context, the balance of structure, dialogue, and autonomy may not be adequate for another set of learners and instructors.

While the demands of a context will dictate how the curriculum developers apply the theory of transactional distance, examples of how other developers have adjusted these three factors to lower TD can be useful for those working on a similar project. With this in mind, the remainder of this article will discuss the specific example of the Basic Online ESL Teacher Training curriculum and will include suggestions of how to adjust the three factors of TD for other volunteer training curricula.

3. Application of these Principles

For several years, a curriculum development team has been working to provide quality basic training for volunteer teachers that have little to no teaching experience and who will be teaching English in Mongolia for about 18 months. Their teaching assignments range from elementary schools to private businesses to non-profit community classes. These volunteers have a time constraint of no more than 15 hours of online training, which they complete synchronously in a designated computer lab, and 24 hours of F2F instruction and observed teaching experience at Brigham Young University's English Language Center (ELC), a lab school that supports student teachers and serves a diverse ESL student population. The ELC

portion of the training provides the volunteers with the opportunity to practice the skills from the online training with a beginning level ESL class and abundant resources and support before traveling to Mongolia and entering their own teaching context.

Prior to the development of the Basic Online ESL Teacher Training, the volunteers used a different curriculum that was created for this context, which will be referred to as the Modular Curriculum. The Modular Curriculum was created before much was known about the potential teaching environments and with very little input from the stakeholders. The content was divided into ten independent modules and was highly technical and theoretical. The curriculum used *More Than a Native Speaker* (Snow, 2006) as a text to accompany the online lessons, a volume that provides a nontechnical introduction for beginning native English-speaking ESL teachers. There were a few comprehension focused assignments per module and two short videos, one explaining the purpose of the training, and one from an external website about creating vocabulary flashcards. There was no L-L interaction, the L-I dialogue was minimal, and there were no opportunities for learner autonomy. The Modular Curriculum served as training for the volunteers for a few years, without any evaluation of its efficacy or adjustments based on observations of the volunteers who received the training.

After a time, the stakeholders communicated with Brigham Young University that the volunteers were not adequately prepared for the teaching contexts. Further evaluation led the developers to recognize that dramatic changes needed to be made to the content, structure, and dialogue of the training the volunteers receive before arriving in their teaching assignments. From the evaluations of the volunteer teachers and the Modular Curriculum, the Basic Online ESL Teacher Training curriculum was designed to more appropriately respond to the context.

For the sake of clarity, the Basic ESL Teacher Training will be referred to as a singular product. However, this curriculum evolved over time and has been implemented and piloted in various iterations, and will continue to change in order to be responsive to needs. Although the curriculum has not remained exactly the same as when it was first piloted, the core of the Basic ESL Teacher Training has remained stable. Because of the complex nature of curriculum development, this article focuses on the evaluation of the aspects of transactional distance and how each of these impacted the design, rather than a discussion of the chronology and individual stages.

3.1 Overview of the Curriculum. The Basic ESL Teacher Training curriculum consists of three units, which answer the questions of why, what, and how. These units are composed of a total of 17 lessons that address the specific principles associated with the units. The *why* unit focuses on introducing the teaching context and the educational culture of Mongolia and why English teachers are needed there. The *what* unit focuses on the teaching materials used in country and the language skills that volunteers will teach in their basic conversational English classes: vocabulary, listening, and speaking. The *how* unit describes the process of lesson planning, classroom management, pedagogical practices, and informal assessment.

The Basic ESL Teacher Training curriculum uses Canvas, a learning management system (LMS), to organize and present these units to the participants. Each lesson requires reading passages from Snow's (1996) *More Than a Native Speaker* (copyright paid to TESOL International) and includes custom videos of an experienced teacher demonstrating the principles, group discussion boards, personal reflections, and assignments that require the novice teachers to apply the principles discussed. A printed workbook also accompanies this online training to serve as a reminder of the material and to provide note-taking space.

As volunteer teachers work through the lessons, they interact with one another as well as an experienced mentor teacher from the English Language Center who serves as the instructor for the course. This mentor monitors the progress of the students and provides feedback and answers to questions throughout the training. The novice teachers submit assignments at the conclusion of each section of the online training to the mentor for formal feedback, but the mentor is also able to review the reflections and discussion boards in order to respond to individual concerns more regularly.

Throughout the development of this curriculum, feedback and evaluation from the developers, stakeholders, and the pilot tests were of great value. Specific feedback received from a survey that students completed at the end of the training will be referenced below. While not all of the suggestions from the evaluations were feasible, the observation that the training needed to be more interactive is consistent with the initial concerns of the stakeholders and curriculum developers and the general research surrounding online distance learning. This feedback will be discussed in greater detail, and is organized according to the categories of structure, dialogue, and autonomy. The lessons learned from this particular example should give direction to others beginning a similar process and help connect theoretical principles to the reality of online curriculum development.

3.2 Need-Based Structure. The first step in developing our online training program was to review the Modular Curriculum, as well as the content and structure of similar programs at other institutions. Once we gathered information about what was available to us, and what other trainings considered to be part of the essential toolkit, we reviewed the concerns of the stakeholders. These stakeholders included the directors of the program, an outside evaluator of the volunteer teachers already in Mongolia, the university professors connected with the training

program, and the novice teachers themselves. As we received feedback on the necessities, lacks, and wants of all of these stakeholders (Nation & Macalister, 2010), the content we had created for this context began to take shape within the demands of this particular situation.

For example, it was determined that the grammar module that was included in the Modular Curriculum was not as crucial as a solid foundation in teaching skills. Although a sound understanding of grammar pedagogy is important in traditional ESL teacher training, these teachers lacked the ability to create language learning objectives and discern between meaningful learning tasks and games to fill the time. Thus, the grammar section was not included in the Basic ESL Teacher Training. Other curriculum developers will likewise need to decide through a careful needs analysis what qualifies as essential training for the volunteers in their contexts.

The needs analysis was central to the structuring of the Basic ESL Teacher Training. It was quickly determined that, with the time constraint of 15 hours for online training, many principles included in existing programs would not be part of our own essential toolkit. Because so many of our volunteers lacked an understanding of basic teaching principles such as classroom management and lesson planning, the greatest emphasis for the training was put on these components. The analysis also indicated the need to be more selective in the assigned readings from *More Than a Native Speaker* (Snow, 2006) and the need to include video clips of a teacher in an actual classroom applying each principle. A workbook with space for notes, additional examples, and a list of free resources to use during and after the training was also added. While the content of each volunteer training program may vary, the inclusion of videos proved to be invaluable. As a result, this element of the curriculum is highly recommended in order to boost both comprehension and lower TD.

After three months of analysis, design, and evaluation, the team began to develop the curriculum. The team divided up the responsibilities for development so that every member of the team was responsible for writing a section, monitoring for consistent formatting, and evaluating the work of another team member. The division of work during the development stage was essential for creating the curriculum under the imposed time frame. As indicated by Gustafson and Branch (2011), teamwork is an vital part of curriculum development and delegating responsibilities for this project allowed for a cohesive product that responded to the observed contextual needs.

After creating content, the team then began to combine the units, sections, and lessons together using the learning management system provided by the university. It is important to mention that careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of different learning management systems (LMS) should take place early in the development process in order to avoid complications. Periodically evaluating the efficacy of the LMS through pilot testing can help developers catch any possible mistakes or problems with the interface or content and make the appropriate adjustments. Some issues with communication through our LMS were not noticed until the first group began using the curriculum. These problems were alleviated by switching to a different LMS that provided easier, more intuitive communication tools and opportunities to customize the tasks and navigation. Finding an appropriate LMS made a significant difference in the presentation of the content and the overall experience for the participants.

The curriculum content itself followed a spiral design (Nation & Macalister, 2010), with each lesson building on the principles and assignments in the previous lessons. As the participants completed the assignments, they submitted the assignments for the review of an experienced mentor, and the feedback they received gave them an opportunity to revise and

improve. The structure was designed to be dynamic, allowing each assignment to build on past experience and feedback and also provide some flexibility in the assignments for the purpose of learner autonomy. For example, as an assignment, a participant would write a reflection about a principle, then after reading more there would be a partner conversation about the topic. Then, the participant would submit an assignment and receive feedback. The product of that assignment, such as a vocabulary activity, would be recycled later in the program so that the student could improve on his or her work using the feedback received. This structure allowed for a greater return on the dialogue that took place and added to the overall cohesion of the curriculum.

From the feedback received during the implementation and evaluation of the online training, a few changes were made to impact the structure. There was some redundancy in the use of the online materials and the workbook that participants felt was busy work, and all participants suggested that the workbook be restructured to be unique from the online training in the content and tasks provided. As for the reading assignments, the chapters from *More Than a Native Speaker* (Snow, 2006) were considered helpful, but the amount of reading without any supporting questions or assignments was overwhelming for the participants. They proposed that the reading be broken up into smaller portions and that more reflective questions be assigned to make the reading more applicable and engaging. This echoes how the student perception of structure can indicate how the objective characteristics, like assignments and presentation, can be adjusted to lower TD.

3.3 Dialogue Based on the Needs. Dialogue was one of the major concerns in designing our curriculum, because the Modular Curriculum did not provide many opportunities for assessing the participants' understanding. According to Brandt's (2006) research, the participants

of similar training programs indicated that opportunities to reflect on their teaching practice were insufficient. Arnold and Ducate (2006) likewise confirm that teacher training “requires reflection, opportunities to apply theory to real-life situations, and a network for the exchange of ideas and support” (p. 42). Therefore, our redesign included different types of tasks to improve the quality and frequency of the dialogue between L-L and L-I (Arnold & Ducate, 2006), especially as it related to reflection and self-evaluation.

There were three types of tasks given to the volunteer teachers in the Basic ESL Teacher Training curriculum: reflections, partner conversations, and mentor-reviewed assignments. In a reflection, the novice teachers were asked to reflect on their goals as ESL teachers, the context in which they would be teaching, and their own language learning experiences to help them internalize the principles being taught. Some of these questions were completed in the workbook and not reported to the mentor, which allowed for some autonomy in how thoroughly participants responded to the questions and the opportunity to honestly reflect on the questions without concern about being assessed.

The partner conversations were originally created because all of the volunteers were working in the same computer lab at the same time and could turn to one another to discuss teaching scenarios or complex concepts. However, this is now accomplished through discussion boards in the LMS to accommodate more flexibility for the volunteers to complete the assignments asynchronously at home rather than using a set time and place. During the evaluation, multiple participants mentioned that the “Companion Conversations” were ineffective because the questions were not complex enough to foster appropriate discussion. Because the questions were easily answered as an individual, participants expressed that it was inconvenient to ask another participant to pause in the middle of the lesson to discuss a prompt

that did not require higher-level thinking. After adjusting the questions based on this feedback, it is clear that the reflective opportunities are more effective and motivating when they are well-written and truly require collaboration.

The last type of task is an assignment that is submitted to the online mentor for review. This assignment is the culmination of the reflections and conversations, and allows the participant to apply what was learned. The mentor then evaluates the responses and gives constructive feedback. Only one mentor-reviewed assignment per section was given to the students. This allowed the participants time to collaborate with other learners and process the mentor's feedback before being evaluated on performance again. A small number of assignments also allowed the mentor the opportunity to provide longer, more specific feedback to each novice teacher. The mentor is still able to monitor the reflections and group discussion boards between assignments and intervene if it is clear that the participants lack understanding. This variety of task types increased the opportunities for dialogue while also allowing for some learner autonomy.

In the responses from the participants about the usefulness of the feedback from the mentor, one participant said:

The feedback was extremely useful because it showed me not only what I could change to make it better but it also showed me what I did well on. It was nice being able to receive feedback and know that how I was planning my lesson or how I would handle a situation was good. I also liked being able to see how I could improve my lesson and how I could change it so that it would either be easier to understand or how I could change it so the students can gain more out of my lesson. It was nice receiving feedback from someone who is experienced and can give advice.

This example demonstrates how the assignments allowed for frequent, positive, corrective feedback from the instructor throughout the curriculum. The other participants echoed this opinion that the L-I interaction was the one of the most valuable aspects of the online training. From their responses we can see that taking the time to create effective assignments that generate quality interaction between instructor and learner can greatly increase the learners' understanding of the content.

Videos were also included to demonstrate the principles explained in the text and facilitate L-C interaction and L-I dialogue. The videos often sparked questions that extended beyond the original intent of the task. After watching a video of a teacher working with ESL students, the participants were asked to respond in some way to the example's purpose, efficacy, or process. However, even with multiple videos for each lesson, participants always suggested including more clips. One of the participants said, "One thing that would maybe be a good alternative to all of the reading (and some reading is fine) is making videos explaining these principles. The professors could write on boards and tell us themselves about these different principles and why they are important." From this suggestion, it is clear that the participants equate the video presentations with connection to the instructors and content. In other words, the videos included in this online training helped to lessen the TD felt by these students by increasing the L-I and L-C dialogue.

Wengrowicz and Offir (2009) stress the definition of TD "as the distance of understanding between the teacher and student" (p. 112). This principle is also seen in the comments of the participants who said, "I felt that there was a lot of great written information for us to read and understand, but when you can watch the application of the information, the information takes on a new meaning," and, "Show me and I'll learn." The use of videos helped

to guide the L-I interaction by improving the L-C dialogue and allowing the online correspondence to focus on the principles that needed further reinforcement or explanation. The last piece of advice offered by the participants was to keep the videos relatively short because this allowed them to be “more straight forward and... obvious in making the point that was intended from the activity.” Therefore, while an increase in the number and a variety of types of videos was encouraged, it would be advisable for curriculum developers to keep them short and focused.

3.4 Autonomy Based on the Needs. In order to reduce TD, learner autonomy was also considered when developing this online training. The participants were asked to set goals and evaluate their motivation, focus, and purpose throughout the curriculum in the reflection activities. They were also given options within the assignments, such as in the classroom management lesson, where they were able to choose between different scenarios and offer their own solutions. There was also one lesson of the online training that focused on teaching children that the participants could choose to revisit if they were assigned to teach young learners. Moreover, the workbook provided additional opportunities for the novice teachers to choose to expand their learning beyond the training to the resources available.

Because the Basic ESL Teacher Training had to be completed within 15 hours and the participants worked on it synchronously, there was little need for additional deadlines. Although the participants using the revised materials were limited to a total number of hours, they had flexibility in how they used their time. Participants were permitted to linger on concepts that were more complex, or work with the mentor on a task that they felt was particularly difficult. That autonomy within the 15 hours allowed for the curriculum to respond to individual learner needs and motivate the participants as they worked towards their goals. The participants were

required to work with a partner on the discussions, but they were able to continue and return to a discussion if their partner needed extra time in a particular section. These partner discussions provided reinforcement of the material, accountability, and motivation for the participants.

One of the downsides of this autonomy, however, was that it created an obstacle for L-I interaction and timely feedback. The more autonomous the curriculum, the more difficult it can become to maintain manageability. In our situation, having the participants write unique responses to the tasks complicated the delivery of feedback because the mentor needed to respond to each student in an equally unique manner. This, combined with the participants completing the assignments late at night or on weekends, meant that the mentor was often unable to respond to the participants before they moved forward. A few participants mentioned that they did not have the opportunity to even read the last responses to their assignments, and that they were not always able to incorporate the feedback in the following tasks because of this time constraint. They suggested having more than one mentor providing feedback or incorporating some standard responses in the text of the training, especially in response to classroom management scenarios. This obstacle was more pronounced because of the spiral curriculum design, but should still be taken into account when working with any curriculum design model.

3.5 Summary of the Application of these Principles. As demonstrated through the example of the Basic ESL Teacher Training, considering the aspects of TD when designing a context-specific curriculum can lead to a better experience for the learners. The participants of this curriculum reported high levels of motivation and were able to directly see the connection between the lessons of the curriculum and the realities of their volunteer teaching assignment. The adjustments made to the structure, dialogue, and autonomy of this particular curriculum reflected the unique demands of the learning context and helped to lower the perceived TD.

While the exact same balance may not work in another context, this example of the process of modifying the presentation of the curriculum in order to fit the needs can help others to develop a similar curriculum for other volunteer teachers or any distance education context.

4. Conclusion

The lessons learned from the development of the Basic ESL Teacher Training curriculum described in this article are shared with the intent of helping others in a similar situation to create a context-based curriculum for volunteer teachers. With the growing need for these volunteers, programs need to consider what essential information needs to be taught to them in order for them to be successful in their teaching situation. Many curriculum developers will find that an online curriculum will be the most beneficial in allowing them to adapt the content and presentation to feed the unique demands of the volunteer context. The principles and application highlighted here will give direction and insight to developers to improve the early iterations of the curriculum created.

Although each context has a unique combination of limitations, expectations, and resources, the general principles of creating an online curriculum for volunteer teachers are the same. The curriculum needs to be focused on the necessities of the context and be stable, responsive, and cohesive (Brigham Young University, 2008). This dynamic, evolving product should consider structure, dialogue, and autonomy in order to strike a balance in the transactional distance of the particular distance education situation. As developers keep these principles in mind and evaluate the content, framework, and delivery of other similar programs, they will be able to create and maintain a curriculum that fits the desired context and provides the necessary training for these novice teachers and, ultimately, more meaningful language instruction for their students.

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