PERCEPTIONS OF PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE PHILIPPINES: SOME POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR ELT [1]

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...the poor reputation which attaches to many correspondence courses carries over to those programmes embraced by the more general use of the term, sometimes with serious consequences. This may account for the misguided impression prevalent in, for example, some parts of the Middle East that distance education programmes are necessarily inferior to in-house courses, an impression reinforced by the fact that 'distance education' and 'correspondence education' are commonly translated into Arabic by the same term. (Richards, 1994:10)

1. INTRODUCTION

Charles Toussaint and Gustave Langenscheid were probably the pioneers of language teaching by correspondence (in Germany in 1856), after Isaac Pitman first offered tuition in shorthand (by post) to students in England in 1840 (Keegan 1990). In the 1970s, distance learning (DL) finally became a field of academic study in its own right, with two principal research groups: the German (Peters; Dohman; Delling) and Scandinavian (Holmberg; Baath) inaugurating studies and surveys on its principles, nature, dynamics, and status (Keegan 1990). It is evident today that since those tentative early years, DL has become an option of educational delivery with an ever-increasing demand.

However, and in spite of this, DL continues to suffer from conservatism, apprehension, and lack of prestige (from many quarters). In addition, language teaching by DL has enjoyed even less expansion and attention than 'content-based' subjects, probably, principally, on account of the specific and complex nature of language learning itself. Lambert (1991) observes that language teaching (by DL) has a 'ghetto' status. Richards & Roe (1994:6) remind us that "distance learning has often been regarded as a *faute de mieux* option, a poor (wo)man's alternative", while Richards points out that, in spite of having been established in 1969, the UK Open University only turned its attention to language learning by DL a quarter of a century later.

As Boyle (1994:129) suggests, these negative attitudinal dispositions towards DL are not only born of stubborn conservatism, ignorance, and fear of the unknown, but of the more mundane stuff of professional self-preservation: "...many teachers regard distance learning as an inferior form of education...they also see it as a threat to their careers". He adds that ignorance of DL language courses is responsible for the small number of such courses.

Richards & Roe (1994:3), however, give us reason for optimism, when they conclude that: "Teachers at last seem to be coming to the realization of the obvious: that it is after all the learner who does the learning, otherwise no learning takes place", and that "force-fed language learning is a contradiction in terms, and cannot in any case be managed from a distance" (6).

Holmberg (1977:9) defines DL, thus:

The term 'distance learning' covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance, and tuition of a tutorial group.

Two main features of this definition of DL will be retained here for the purposes of this paper: 1) the separation (in time and space) of teacher and learner; and, 2) the planning of an educational institution.

This paper sets out to present and discuss the findings of a mini-survey undertaken in the educational sector of Manila, Philippines in 1997 on perceptions of problems and prospects for DL in this relatively populous, developing country[2] with an evident yearning for educational delivery, if not deliverance. Some inferences are then made, as to the possible implications of these findings, with regard to language teaching by DL (specifically, ELT) in the country.

2. DL IN THE PHILIPPINES: BRIEF HISTORY, NATURE, AND STATUS

Gonzalez's (1984:3) grid in "Forms of 'Distance Study' in the Philippines" would suggest that DL started in the Philippines in the late 1970s through the efforts of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports (e.g. RATES[3] and CET[4]), as well as the "School-on-the-air" (*Tulong Aral* programs), although Saplala (1997) reports that the UP Los Baños already had radio programs in 1967 on dairy farming (*Paaralang Panghimpapawid*) in the DZLB area (7pm-8pm, twice weekly).

According to Gonzalez (1984:1), there are two understandings of DL in the Philippines: non-formal continuing education and formal off-campus but credit-bearing degree courses (e.g. AIDE[5]). DL is said to exist at all three levels of education in both the public and private sectors. He reports that DL (in the Philippines) is mainly by correspondence (i.e. printed instructional materials), although the hope is to make it tri-medial (i.e. audio, visual, and print). It does not, however, preclude periodic meetings with tutors at centers (for consultation, assessment, and feedback). His overall assessment of DL in the Philippines, at least in those early years, was: local (rather than national) in orientation; needful of the production of (expensive) software for radio and TV programs; and, "underdeveloped...inchoate and most likely not really succeeding" (8).

Saplala (1997) traces, specifically, the evolution of the UP Open University, established in February, 1995, and inspired by the Los Baños DL radio programs. She mentions several degree and diploma programs that were launched (e.g. the Teacher Upgrade Diploma in Science Teaching [DST]; other programs were in Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Math). She also acknowledges the skepticism with which these programs were met: "The DEP and later UP teams went from campus to campus answering the numerous questions of the faculty some of whom were skeptical of, if not at times, fully opposed to, distance education" (3).

Let us now turn to the tone and orientations of the policy guidelines on DL pronounced (in July, 1995) by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

The CHED (1995:1) defines a DL program as one in which "at least half of the total number of hours required for a degree program is offered outside of the confines of the formal classroom set-up where student-teacher contact is normally required". Three principal features of these guidelines will be highlighted here:

— A prospective DL student "must show evidences that he/she is unable to attend formal classroom instruction" for reasons of disability, workload, or distance from a higher education institution (2);

— "Units earned through Distance Education may be credited in other Institutions subject to that Institution's and CHED's policies on "transfer of credits". The receiving Institution shall reserve the right to evaluate the student's credentials before accepting him/her to the Institution" (4); and,

— "Regular monitoring and renewal of permits shall be undertaken by the CHED Regional Offices" (4).

The skepticism and constraints inherent in these policy guidelines—which, otherwise, would be called 'quality control' measures—are self-evident. It is in recognition of such anxieties, attitudes, and fears that this survey was undertaken.

3. THE SURVEY

3.1   Aims

As stated earlier, the principal aim of the survey was to report on the perceptions (of a sample population of Filipinos in Manila) of the problems and prospects of DL as an alternative form of education in the Philippines, and their possible implications for ELT. In addition, it is hoped and expected that the findings of this survey could serve as a point of reference for future attempts to promote DL in the country.

3.2   The Respondents

Sixty respondents (30 male; 30 female) were randomly selected, mainly from the educational circles of Manila, for the questionnaire survey. Their age ranged was from 17 - 72 years, and the average age was in the 30s. Most of the respondents (82%) had had some form of university education—60% of them at postgraduate level. Only 11 of the respondents found themselves, or had stopped their formal education, at the secondary level. The sample also comprised 18 employees of the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports (DECS). Only 8 of the respondents (15%) had undertaken some course of study abroad, mainly in North America and Singapore (RELC).

One-third of the respondents were formally regarded as having come in direct contact with distance education, either as students or practitioners (hereafter referred to as DLIs—'distance learning initiates'). They made regular reference to the Polytechnic University of the Philippines Open University (PUPOU) Master's course in Educational Management, the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Cap College, the AIDE and tutorials in Automative and Diesel Mechanics, as examples of DL programs they were aware of. Two of the respondents had also prepared DL modules for the UNESCO either in Paris or Bangkok.

3.3   Research Methods and Procedure

The survey was based principally on questionnaires; however, some eminent educators in the Philippines[6]—one of whom had written a paper on the state of DL in the country (see bibliography)—were also interviewed.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information on: the respondents' level of awareness of DL, especially in the Philippines; comparisons made with direct teaching (DT) programs, where applicable; a statement on those aspects of DL they found attractive (or otherwise); what level of education would be most appropriate for it, given the present context of development of the country; what practical problems, in their view, were plaguing educational delivery (and may be posed to DL); what prospects there were for DL; and, their own evaluation of the communication and transport facilities and services operative, today, in the country. The questionnaire was composed of polar and multiple-choice questions, but with opportunities to elaborate on the responses given. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, but gave the interviewees an opportunity to elaborate on a number of issues of their choice.

3.4   Field Problems

The main field problem encountered during the survey came from an unexpected source: those in authority in institutions running DL programs. There was, apparently, some suspicion, as to the final (commercial) use to which the survey findings may be put (by the author).

3.5   DL in the Philippines: Perceptions of Problems

Let us, first, preview those priority problems for national education in the Philippines, as expressed by the respondents, in the event that some of these might have a bearing on perceptions of DL itself.

The lack of adequately-trained teaching staff, and the financial difficulties parents have in paying for their children's education, were ranked as the primary problems (23% and 14%, respectively, i.e. of the total number of entries) of Philippine education. These were followed by the lack of modern educational facilities (e.g. teaching aids and equipment) (11%), and poor government funding (8.7%); jointly-ranked fifth were transportation problems experienced by students to and from learning centers, and the lack of instructional modules (8%). Other problems highlighted by the respondents ranged from poor

communication facilities (including information technology) to the
irrepressible boom in student population. (See Table 1 below.[7])

**Table 1:   Perceptions of problems in national education and DL
(in the Philippines)**

Perceptions of problems in national education (in the Philippines):	Ratings (in %)
1. Lack of adequately-trained teaching staff	23
2. Parents' financial difficulties in paying children's fees	14
3. Lack of modern technological facilities (e.g. teaching aids and equipment)	11
4. Poor government funding	8.7
5. Students' transportation problems (to and from learning centers)	8
6. Lack of instructional modules	8
7. Others: inadequate communication facilities (including information technology); the irrepressible student population; etc.	(27.3)
Perceptions of problems in DL (In the Philippines):	
1. Inadequate communication technology	13
2. Lack of public awareness/advertising	12
3. Poor instructional modules	11
4. Lack of adequately-trained teachers	8
5. Poor government funding	8
6. Students' financial difficulties (in paying fees)	4
7. Absence of direct teaching support	3

In relation to DL, specifically, about 1 in 8 of the respondents
pointed to inadequate communication technology as the priority
problem for this mode of learning. This was followed closely by: lack of
public awareness/advertising (12%); poor instructional modules (11%);
lack of trained (full-time) tutors and lack of government funding (8%,
each).   Other problems raised ranged from the financial difficulties
students experience in paying tuition fees (4%), to the absence of direct
teaching support, which 4 respondents (3%) felt was indispensable to
proper learning.   An interesting problem raised, which is probably now
part of folklore in educational circles in Manila, is what one of the male
respondents called the *ningas-cogon* attitude of the students (i.e. a
metaphoric comparison with a grass that burns enthusiastically, initially
and then fizzles out, just as quickly, thereafter)—an apparent reference
to the motivational pattern of Filipino students.

As mentioned earlier, the survey also sought to elicit information on the respondents' assessments of the updatedness and efficiency of communication and transport services in the country—an essential condition for DL to be operationally successful.

Table 2: **Ratings of public transport and communication services (in the Philippines)**

Public communication services	Ratings (in %)
International postal services	
a. very good	11.7
b. fair	65
c. poor	23.3
National postal services	
a. very good	16.7
b. fair	56.6
c. poor	26.7
International telephone/fax services	
a. very good	26.7
b. fair	53.3
c. poor	16.7
d. don't know	3.3
National telephone/fax services	
a. very good	25
b. fair	46.7
c. poor	26.6
d. don't know	1.7
Educational TV services	
a. very good	16.7
b. fair	48.3
c. poor	31.7
d. don't know	3.3

One in 2 of the respondents was of the view that the Philippines is adequately equipped, in terms of modern communication and transport facilities and services. Reference was made to the existence of the AIDE and Cap College programs, as proof-enough that DL was already operational in the Philippines.

Evaluations of specific branches of public communication services (including educational radio and TV programs) gave the following results; 80% of the respondents were of the view that international telephone/fax services in the Philippines were either 'very good' or 'fair'; 76.7% were of similar view, as regards international postal services; 73.3%, for national postal services; and, 71.7%, for national telephone/fax services. The ratings were lower for educational TV (65%) and radio (56.7%) services.

Public transport services were ranked, following similar parameters of evaluation, thus: international air transport (89.9%); national air transport (85%); national road transport (76.7%); and, national water transport (63.2%). Rail transport was least positively evaluated at 31.6%.

Finally, self-access study (audio tapes; videos; computer software) and library/book access facilities in the country were not highly assessed (43.3% and 41.7%, respectively). (See Table 2.)

3.6   DL in the Philippines: Perceptions of Prospects

Although 50% of the respondents did not have a view on the question, since they had had no contact with a DL course in any form, when asked to compare DL courses to DT ones, only 2 (out of the remaining 30) said they were 'not as good'. (See Table 3.)

A healthy 78.3% confessed to being aware of DL courses in the Philippines, most of them citing the programs of the UPOU, Cap College, AIDE, DECS, and International Correspondence School (ICS), in that rank order.

On the question of what level of education would benefit most from DL courses, 73.3% pointed to the tertiary level, followed by vocational study (40%); only 8.3% thought DL would be appropriate for primary education.

More than 86 percent (86.7%) and 83.3% of the respondents indicated that they found DL attractive as an alternative mode of learning, on account of its flexibility (i.e. one could work and study at the same time, and at one's pace) and relatively lower cost to the student, respectively.

On the possibility of teaching English (by DL) in the Philippines, a clear 90% of the respondents saw no reason why not; one male respondent actually tried to underline the point that some students learn better with a 'virtual teacher'. Most, however, founded their approval on two principal conditions: that adequate and appropriate audio-visual and multi-media facilities be provided (with any printed instructional materials); and, the fact that Filipinos already had basic competences in English, anyway.

Table 3: Perceptions of prospects (of DL in the Philippines)

Perceptions of prospects (of DL in the Philippines)	Ratings (in %)
Are you aware of DL courses in the Philippines?	
Yes No	78.3 21.7
In your opinion, are DL courses just as good as DT courses?	
Yes No Can't say	46.7 3.3 50
What level (of education) would most benefit from DL?	
Tertiary Vocational Primary education	73.3 40[8] 8.3
In your opinion, why is DL an attractive option to DT?	
DL is flexible ("One can work and study at the same time, and at one's pace") DL is relatively cheaper for the student	86.7 83.3[9]
Is it feasible to teach English by DL (in the Philippines)?	
Yes No ("Yes" was founded on 2 conditions: 1. that adequate and appropriate audio-visual/ multi-media facilities be provided; and, 2. Filipinos already have some basic competences in English, anyway.)	90 10
Would you like to see DL encouraged as a mode of learning (in the Philippines)?	
Yes No ("Yes" was founded on 3 grounds: 1. DL is flexible; 2. DL is accessible (to a greater populace); and, 3. DL is a relatively cheaper mode of education.	86.7 13.3
If you happened to be in a position of influence and power, in the future (e.g. Secretary of Education), would you propose DL as an option of educational delivery?	
Yes No	78.3 21.7

When asked if they would like to see DL encouraged in the Philippines, as a mode of learning, a comforting 86.7% indicated their approval, most of them insisting on the flexibility, accessibility (to a greater populace), and relatively lower cost of this form of education.

Finally, and significantly, on the hypothetical question of whether they would propose DL as an option for educational delivery, if they happened to be in a position of influence and power (for example, Secretary for Education), an overwhelming 78.3% said they would. Again, more than half this number cited the flexibility, accessibility, and lower cost attributes of DL. Although currently a DL practitioner of some consequence in the Philippines, one of the respondents actually emphasized that DL has 'arrived' (in the country), and that it was only a matter of time before it enjoyed the official and public recognition it deserves.

The respondents claimed they would go about implementing such a program following five main steps:

Step 1: establishing/supporting (existing) learning centers;
Step 2: developing and piloting (user-friendly) instructional modules;
Step 3: raising public awareness, as to the nature and benefits of DL;
Step 4: training/recruiting module writers/tutors; and,
Step 5: assessing the media of delivery available at the national level and improving telecommunication infrastructure.

The impact of independent variables (gender, age, level of formal education, DLI vs. non-DLI) on these findings appears to be minimal, if not non-existent. The only observation that could be made, in this regard, pertains to their evaluation of communication and transport facilities/services in the Philippines, where male respondents seemed to present more positive assessments than the females, although the margin was not statistically significant.

The interviews followed, more or less, the same pattern of attitudes towards DL, i.e. positive. The main fears expressed by Brother Andrew Gonzalez, FSC and Dr. Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista had to do with the sociological aspect of DL in the Philippines, i.e. the possibility of enjoying both the physical and individual space to carry on the autonomous work required in the home setting, and ways of ensuring quality control, respectively.

3.7   Some implications for ELT in the Philippines

The following can be considered as some of the inferences one can come to, based on the survey's findings, with regard to the level of reception and the nature of the challenges that await DL and ELT (by DL) in the Philippines:

1) Given the findings of this mini-survey, DL is clearly another avenue for ELT.

2) For now, most DL programs may still need to concentrate on tertiary/vocational education.

3) There is clearly a challenge to produce DL language instructional modules and software for the local context.

4) There is a need to improve communication and technological facilities (e.g. interactive multi-media) at learning centers, if ELT (by DL) is to be easily extendable to lower educational levels (e.g. the secondary).

5) Efforts aimed at ELT (by DL) should be streamlined and pooled together to avoid dispersion and duplication.

6) While language courses could prove more tricky to deliver (by DL), especially given the psycholinguistic requirements of L2 acquisition, Literature (in English), English Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, as well as ESP courses, should be more easily deliverable.

4. CONCLUSION

In spite of attempts to promote local languages in education, there is no doubt in this author's mind that English will continue to play a major role in education, sociocommunication and other walks of life in the Philippines for a very long time to come. As Richards & Roe (1994:2) put it: "The underlying worldwide demand for new language skills...is undoubtedly rapidly gathering strength...(in many countries, English is already a reference language, *de jure* at undergraduate level, *de facto* at postgraduate level)". Consequently, ELT (by DL) is one of those practical, convenient, and cheaper options that the educational authorities may have to take more seriously, if English, and education through it, are to reach the masses of the people.

While it is difficult to arrive at any generalizations, based on the findings of this mini-survey, the principal problems facing DL in the Philippines would appear to be a combination of the lack of: communication/technological infrastructure, public awareness, instructional materials, trained personnel, and efficient self-access centers. In attempting to identify problems and prospects of ELT (by DL) in the Philippines, this mini-survey could be considered as providing a guide and some groundwork for those wishing to consider this option of educational delivery.

However, for those who may fall into the trap of thinking that DL courses are simply 'transportations' of on-site ones, Richards & Roe (14-15) have some useful advice:

> ...any successful approach to distance education must focus on the nature of the interaction between student and teacher, and the implications of this for systems design; it is not enough to attempt a straightforward 'transfer' of a conventional course to distance education mode, hoping to rely on an efficient production and delivery system. Failure to recognize this and to consider the crucial balance between independence and support is a recipe for failure.

ENDNOTES

[1]My sincere thanks to the English Language Institute, University of Surrey, which sponsored this survey, and to all the research assistants in Manila, without whom this survey would not have seen the light of day.

[2]The Philippines is a southeast Asian country with a total land area of 300,000 sq. kilometers made up principally of eleven islands. The 1990 census put its population at 66 million, with an annual growth rate of 2.5%, to reach 77 million by the year 2000. 65% of the population claimed to have some understanding of English.
(Internet Source: http://dir.yahoo.com/Regional/Countries/Philippines/Country-Guide/)

[3]Radio-assisted Teaching in Elementary Schools.

[4]Continuing Education of Teachers.

[5]Asian Institute for Distance Education.

[6]I would like to thank Brother Andrew Gonzalez and Dr. Ma. Lourdes Bautista for their time.

[7]Only principal ratings are presented.

[8]Respondents ticked more than one selection here.

[9]Ditto.

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