

Idea Sharing: Facilitating Presentation Skills through Integrated Face-to-Face and Distance Learning, as well as Forum Instruction

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Abstract

This paper mainly discusses presentation skill classes for officials and follows an opportunity given to the writer to play a part in classes planned for the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) Phase Two, sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and the Ministry of Education in Thailand. Details on how the program and the classes were conducted are discussed, including extensive face-to-face classes, a distance learning course and a forum. In addition, the advantages and disadvantages that the writer encountered and learned from acting as a co-teacher in the face-to-face courses and the forum, and as an instructor in distance learning courses using a webinar are outlined. Experience in co-teaching with the native speakers is also documented.

Keywords: co-teaching, distance learning, forum, integrated instruction, Lower Mekong, online learning, presentation skills, webinar

บทนำ

บทความนี้กล่าวถึงประสบการณ์การสอนทักษะการนำเสนอจากการที่ผู้เขียนได้มีโอกาสเข้าร่วมสอนโครงการการริเริ่มลุ่มแม่น้ำโขงระยะที่สอง ซึ่งเป็นโครงการที่ได้รับการสนับสนุนจากสถานทูตสหรัฐอเมริกาและกระทรวงศึกษาธิการของไทย โครงการนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะการนำเสนอ แก่ข้าราชการในประเทศแถบลุ่มแม่น้ำโขง โดยมีรายละเอียดของโครงการ ระบบการเรียนรู้ เริ่มจากการเรียนต่อหน้า (ในห้องเรียน) การเรียนทางไกล และการจัดสัมมนา รวมไปถึงข้อดี ข้อด้อยในแง่มุมต่างๆ ที่ผู้เขียนได้ประสบและเรียนรู้จากการทำงานเป็นผู้สอนในชั้นเรียนทั้งสามแบบนอกเหนือไปจากนั้นโครงการดังกล่าวได้นำเสนอประสบการณ์การผสมผสานวิธีการสอนทั้งสามรูปแบบเข้าด้วยกัน รวมไปถึงประสบการณ์การสอนร่วมกับเจ้าของภาษา

คำสำคัญ การสอนร่วม การเรียนทางไกล เวที การสอนแบบบูรณาการ แม็โขงล่าง การเรียนออนไลน์ ทักษะการนำเสนอ เว็บบิน่า

Introduction

The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) is a training program mainly supported by the U.S. Embassy. The project is aimed to establish an international bond among the Lower Mekong countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. This program foresaw an improvement in the English communication skills for government officials when attending international meetings or conferences. In fact, such skills can lead these countries to negotiate and promote mutual relationships more efficiently among the countries. Phase One of the LMI was developed in 2012 (more information on Phase One can be found from Damrongmanee, 2013). Phase Two began in October 2013 and was completed in May 2014.

The goal of LMI was to equip government officials with effective presentation skills. It was designed to begin with the teaching of presentation skills to potential participants in a classroom situation, called face-to-face instruction. Then, the participants from five countries would continue the course by attending distance-learning classes. After that, the participants who demonstrated definite skill potential were invited to attend the forum and perform a real presentation.

LMI covers six “pillars” of interest: agricultural and food security, connectivity, education, energy security, environment and water, and health. For each pillar, candidates from fields relevant to the pillar are selected to join the face-to-face session. When the intensive course is concluded, the distance learning session follows which provides the participants with the opportunity to learn online with colleagues from the other four countries. At this stage, some participants who have completed both the face-to-face and distant learning courses are chosen, based on their performance, to join the forum in Bangkok. Thailand was chosen as the headquarters for this program as preparation before phase two began here and it was also as the place where the forum would be held for participants to join.

Selecting participants

As the specified goal for the program was to prepare officials with better English presentation skills, the selection was aimed at all government departments. Additionally, some requirements and processes were applied. First, when the program was opened for potential participants, the program coordinator sent out a letter to inform relevant government departments. Officials who could participate in this program would need to be selected firstly by their own department. Once listed, the participants were then called by the senior English language fellow for an interview. This was an important process for determining whether the participants had the potential to attend this intensive course. Conducted only in English, the class required learners to have at least an intermediate level of English proficiency. Not only was the

learner's language ability needed, but also their time commitment was required. Some participants that passed the interview could not join the seven-day intensive program due to their tight work schedule. Thus, some potential officials had to forgo this opportunity, resulting in a small class size for some pillars. One final important consideration was whether the participants were planning to give a presentation in the near future. This factor was one of the main program concerns since it was designed to give the participants the opportunity to use these skills in real life. All requirements were taken into account when the selection interviews were conducted.

Face-to-face course

As mentioned above, the purpose of the face-to-face class was to provide the participants with basic presentation skills, which included language and manners, as well as to assist those preparing to give an international presentation in the near future. When thinking about a classroom situation, the picture of a teacher meeting students face-to-face is the image we may perceive. In LMI, however, there was not only one teacher but two or three provided per classroom, since a co-teaching method was applied in this intensive course.

Co-teaching

As defined by Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain and Shamberger (2010), co-teaching means having two teachers with different specializations, one in general education and the other in a specialized field. This team approach better assists learners, especially those with special needs. In the LMI case though, the program applied this co-teaching strategy to Thai students working in collaborative teamwork with an American teacher and Thai instructors. Although not many favorable studies were found regarding the use of collaboration between native and non-native speakers of English, the provision of more than one teacher to facilitate the classroom instruction can benefit students as an opportunity to recognize and interact with different personalities, teaching styles, and voices (Carless & Walker, 2006).

Apart from co-teaching, the lessons were also developed together through the availability of technology, for example email, Skype, Google Drive, and Dropbox. In addition, dividing roles and responsibilities is essential for successful teaching collaboration (Park, 2014). Once the teachers had agreed on the lesson plans, the schedule was to be discussed to ensure that at least two teachers would be present together in the class in order to retain the co-teaching concept. As seen in Park's (2014) study, one main advantage of co-teaching is that the non-native English teacher can fill in any comprehension gaps because of a lack of English competence. This co-teaching worked in the LMI situation as it provided students with the opportunity to seek advice from both the American teacher, who exemplified the seminar situation with samples and cultural notes, and the Thai teachers, who shared similar perspectives to the students.

Class information

Unlike Phase One (Damrongmanee, 2013) when all of the participants were flown from their countries for a class in Thailand, the classes in LMI Phase Two were conducted in the individual Lower Mekong countries. The U.S. Embassy assigned five native English speakers who were responsible for co-teaching with the teachers in the countries to which they were appointed. In Bangkok, the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) was in charge of teaching the Thai participants during a class period of forty hours for each face-to-face pillar. Each American teacher was responsible for designing his or her course and materials with his or her co-teachers.

At first, the teaching plan was to have two instructors per course, an American and a Thai instructor. However, no Thai co-teacher at CULI could meet such a requirement due to their regular work load and because the intensive course's tight time frame stipulated that all needed to be completed within seven days. Therefore, two Thai co-teachers were assigned for each pillar. As a result, a total of three instructors facilitated the class for the whole face-to-face session. The author was given a chance to teach the Connectivity Pillar, which involved five participants, whose work deals with international land transportation, international trade law, highway departments, bridge construction, railway transport, and maritime transport.

The content of the class, as planned collaboratively according to the goals, focused on presentation skills and involved writing bio data, the processes of presenting, the language used in meetings, note-taking strategies, email guidelines, and writing an abstract. After these skills were taught, the participants were required to give an actual presentation regarding their work. This usually concerned a current or future planned project. Because such project presentations could often be quite lengthy, even as long as one hour, the participants were asked to present for only twenty minutes per person, including a five minute question and answer session. Everyone had to listen to the presentation, write comments for his or her peers, and ask at least one relevant question. A review of each presentation from the instructors and their peers was given at the end of the class.

Distance Learning

After the face-to-face class, the students who agreed to participate in the next phase of this integrated instruction undertook the distance-learning (DL) course. Online learning can serve as an access point for students to higher education from wherever they learn (Power & Vaughan, 2010). The aims of the distance learning were to continue the presentation skill course and to give participants an opportunity to communicate with other people who work in similar fields in other countries. Most importantly, the participants would learn, through the projects provided in the course, to be attentive presenters and active listeners by using the language and skills learnt to communicate with the participants from other Lower Mekong countries. Taking the

DL course would allow participants to think critically about a presentation both when they were presenting and also when they were listening, receiving information and asking questions.

Similar to the face-to-face course, the distance learning courses were offered according to the number of pillars. Establishing a DL system for participants was important since learning online through webinar software can be new for many people. First of all, to ensure a realistic schedule for everyone, a questionnaire asking for their preferred details was distributed in the face-to-face class for the participants to fill out. Next, in order to familiarize the Thai participants with distance learning, a sample online class was shown in the face-to-face class. Participants registered for the online classes, which were held for 4 weeks, had to attend a 90-minute class two times a week, which accounted for a total of 12 hours of online learning.

Setting up a schedule

Before the DL class could begin, it was necessary to arrange the participants' schedule according to the requested timetable. This needed to be very open for the participants. In other words, the class time was selected based mainly on the learners' availability. The participants could choose a time slot beginning from as early as 8 am till as late as 10 pm. What they needed to do was to fill in as many time slots as they could from Monday to Friday. Saturday and Sunday were deselected as LMI Phase One had demonstrated that participants tended not to attend weekend classes.

Apart from grouping the participants according to their preferred schedule, another condition which needed to be taken into account concerned variations according to nationality. The head of distance learning, an American appointed by the U.S. embassy, was designated to manage this grouping process. In every pillar, the head would try to separate those that came from the same country in order to create a variety of nationalities in the online class. A perfectly diverse class included participants from all five countries, even though some may have become acquainted during the face-to-face session.

The number of the online instructors was counted as well as the number of participants registered for each pillar. Between three to five instructors were used throughout the distance learning courses. Except for the head of DL, all of the online instructors were a Thai CULI teacher. Some instructors could teach only one class, while others could carry as many as three classes, depending on their workload and availability.

Programs assisting online learning

Online learning when mixed with technology that successfully aids communication can be a pleasant experience (Power & Vaughan, 2010). Selecting the appropriate program to connect with the participants was a crucial decision to make for LMI. Since many programs were available for online learning and meetings, it was

necessary to consider what options a particular program might offer would be the most beneficial to LMI learning. Various programs and their application to online courses were listed; for example, websites, chat rooms, email, webinars, blogs, and discussion boards. Despite the large number of possible programs, comparison and eventual choice were manageable, particularly as program features and most importantly, the LMI goals and purposes, to equip the participants with communication skills that could be used to further their professional development, were taken into account. Reflecting on that, the perfect choice was the webinar.

A webinar, which comes from the two terms “web” and “nar,” coined from “seminar,” is an interactive seminar program based on the World Wide Web with useful features for meetings such as a live presentation, lecture, or workshop. The user can participate in this real-time program through chatting, video chatting, or file sharing. As our selection was limited to the webinar, only two platforms were in the final list: Adobe Connect and WebEx. Furthermore, part of an instructor’s responsibility was to find a tool that provided a best fit for the program’s needs and to utilize it (Lamy & Hampel, 2007). Although both the Adobe Connect and WebEx platform websites are webinars, the layout of the two is different. Adobe Connect was arranged as pod-based, while WebEx was tab based. Adobe Connect was the first program employed. The pod, as shown in figure 1, is “the panel that makes up the layout for your meeting rooms.” The meeting can be managed by pressing on the pod menu, which provides a choice of sharing, discussion, or collaboration. In this example, discussion was used since the class was talking about a topic that required the users to include Thailand in the response by referring to the note on the screen and typing in some key points.

Figure 1: Pod style of Adobe Connect – Discussion page

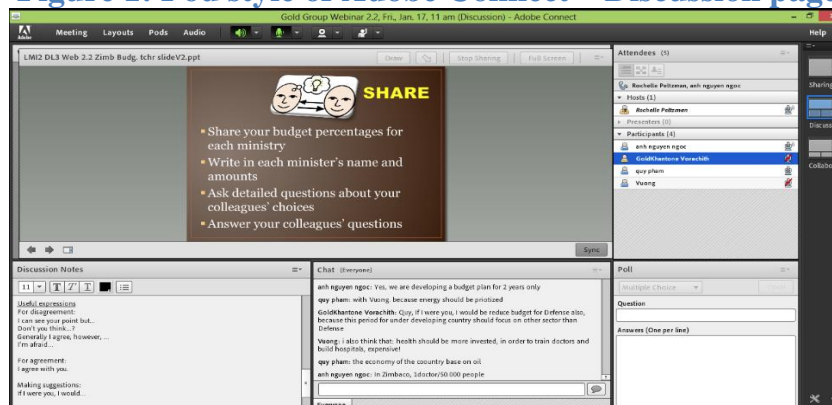
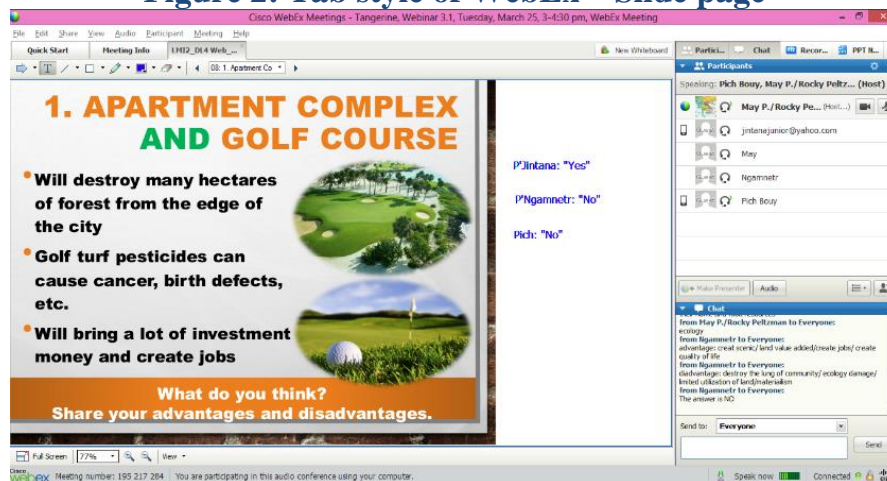
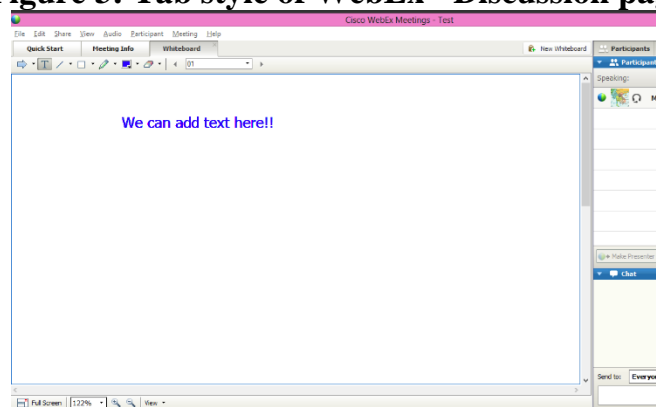


Figure 2: Tab style of WebEx – Slide page

The second program explored next was WebEx, which uses a tab style that allows the user to press on a tab to choose the panel they want. The slide and discussion notes on Adobe Connect are shown on the same page, while on WebEx they are shown on a separate page with the help of a tab, as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 3: Tab style of WebEx - Discussion page

WebEx was the eventual choice made after exploring Adobe Connect for three distance-learning courses. The different platforms did not affect the final decision. The program switch was made solely because of the quality of the Internet connection when doing video-conferencing. No Internet issue was found when the host, the instructor, was the only one streaming the video. However, WebEx was found to be more stable when the participants were sharing a video. In addition, the voice quality was found to be better on WebEx than Adobe Connect.

Participants

When first assigned, the number of participants in each online-learning class was limited to no more than 8 persons per session, excluding the instructor. A mix of different nationalities was a must because a fundamental aim of the program was to establish a network amongst the countries involved. However, the ratio and the number of participants from each country were never the equal because of two factors.

The first concerned the application process where only the participants who met the English proficiency and time availability requirements were accepted. The second factor was the registration for the online course. Not all of the participants knew how to register for online classes correctly. For example, no participant from Myanmar registered for the second online course as no instruction on online registration was given.

Class information

The online course met twice a week and all participants were required to check the program website and his or her email before attending each 90-minute class because for class preparation and homework submission. Usually, an email was sent to the participant's registered email address at least three days before the class meeting as a reminder of the schedule together with a note regarding homework assignments. If the participants missed the email, they would not be able to join the session since details concerning access to each webinar session was included in the email. As a learning continuum from the face-to-face classes, the presentation skills were taught by providing sample situations (as homework) for the participants to practice; for example, skills such as introducing themselves, presenting a project or their ideas, and asking and answering questions during a meeting.

Not only did the participants have required preparation work to complete before the class, but the instructor too had to be prepared. For instance, the online instructor was required to log on at least fifteen minutes before the class started. This was done to ensure the participants would not be afraid of staying online if they came to class earlier than the schedule and found no one online. In addition to that, the instructor needed some time to upload the classroom notes and PowerPoint, which could sometimes take at least five minutes. Furthermore, if the participants' homework presentations were due to be presented, the instructor had to upload these students' documents. In short, this meant that the instructor needed to allow extra time to download them from the emails and to have them already uploaded on the particular class's program so that when it was a participant's turn to present, the presentations could flow smoothly from one participant to the next.

Skills taught and obtained

The interaction in the class could be between the instructor and the participants or a participant and the instructor or amongst everyone. Integrated skill use was obviously applied in this online course. The types of interaction that the participants produced could be either through speaking and/or writing, as long as they read the information and questions on the discussion board and produced a response using their background knowledge and cognitive skills. Although our preferred method of communication was listening and speaking, everyone could choose to type in a response together with or instead of a spoken response. The webinar provides a chat box where participants can type in order to interact with the whole group or privately with the instructor.

Furthermore, the course teacher would act as a facilitator, encouraging the participants to talk and type in their keywords at the same time in order to prevent conveying a wrong message due to the voice quality. Interestingly, typing and talking simultaneously was a skill that some of the participants learned from this online course. Since it was sometimes difficult for a participant to think about which keywords they needed to type in for their peers, the instructor occasionally needed to remind the participants to type in their keywords. On the other hand, some of the participants learned to automatically type in their keywords or sentences when talking about specific issues. As a result, amongst the feedback we obtained from the participants of the DL course was the comment that they learned to type faster.

Apart from using these integrated skills in class, the participants also learned to criticize constructively with the help of the notes provided on the topic. These included notes on issues concerning the language of meetings, such as how to interrupt another speaker and how to ask someone to clarify what he or she had said. As an illustration, one of the assignments before the class asked the participants to decide how a country's budget should be used, how they would allocate it to each department, and what reasons they would use to justify those decisions. The participants presented their ideas to the class, listened to the comments, and answered questions from the instructor and their peers. As a listener, everyone had to come up with at least one question about the presenter's project with a comment on what they considered to be positive or negative about the presentation. The purpose of such interactive procedures was to foster language use and each participant's critical thinking skills during each meeting so that the participants could become more active listeners.

Forum

The forum was an event that allowed the participants to make use of all of skills that had been learned from the face-to-face and DL courses and to experience what it would be like if they attended a seminar as a presenter. Two forums were held to include the selected participants from all six pillars. The first forum, which occurred in March 2014, focused on agricultural and food security, connectivity, and energy security. Approximately three months later, in May 2014, the second forum centered on the environment and water, education, and health. The forum, which lasted three days, was packed with a schedule that led the participants to create their final project, a poster presentation. During its first two days, each forum guided the participants through speed networking, making a poster for a presentation, writing a proposal, using Prezi³ for a presentation, and Google Drive⁴ as a collaborative tool,

³ Prezi is presentation software that offers attractive displays and tools. More information on Prezi can be obtained from www.prezi.com.

⁴ Google Drive is a file storage service offered by Google website. It allows users to save and edit files online and save them on the website.

and working in a team together with international participants from the other pillars. On the third and final day of the forum, a poster presentation was set up in a conference room and each participant had the chance to present and then take a turn walking around the room listening and commenting.

If they had been successful in the initial interview, each applicant received a chance to study in the face-to-face and distance learning course. Nonetheless, when it came to the forum, only some of the participants would proceed with this process. The reasons for deciding which participants would be offered the opportunity to attend the forum depended on their performance in class. This selection process was divided into two parts: the score received from the face-to-face instructor, which made up 70 percent of the total score, and the remaining 30 percent came from the online learning instructor. When the scores were combined, only the top two to four people from amongst ten to twenty participants would be invited to the forum. The notification was sent through email for confirmation. If any top-scoring participants could not make it, the slot would be turned to the next top-scoring participant.

Outcomes

Benefits

While it is accurate to assert that the goal of the LMI is to develop the officials' communication skills, it cannot be denied that the LMI courses were also beneficial to many other people, not only the target group. The direct contribution of holding the program was indeed to the participants and the instructors, however each of the governments and related organizations involved benefitted as well.

Participants

The first advantage that the participants attained from the LMI was improving their communication skills. Through the activities in the project, they learned to listen attentively for details. Then, by switching roles, they became competent in speaking with attention paid to the listeners' understanding. Additionally, they acquired the ability to question and answer with formative ideas. Apart from the effective communication skills that the participants gained, many new connections were established, nationally and internationally. The program provided a chance for the top performers to know each other from the face-to-face course, the DL course, and the forum. As they experienced networking, many participants came to appreciate its system and some even considered arranging such activity within their own countries, thus advancing their connection with other organizations. The participants not only learned to share professional information, but also gained a chance to explore each other's cultures.

Instructor

Even with the experience of being an instructor of some ESP courses, this researcher benefitted through the experience of teaching the LMI. First, helping learners who were specialists in their fields of work allowed the instructor the opportunity to listen to various types of language use in actual work situations. As an illustration, many unfamiliar positions were mentioned since they represented the special vocabulary of each work field; for instance, instructors may have learnt some new compound nouns used when the participants introduced themselves, such as operation and maintenance manager. The next advantage was the instructors being able to grow more familiar with the different accents of people from the Lower Mekong region. When the first distance-learning classes occurred, listening and responding to every participant was challenging since some of the participants' accents could be strong. However, after the completion of a couple of courses, the communication became smoother and faster since the instructors had become more familiar with their students' accents. As a result, breakdown in communication as a consequence of accents while talking with the participants in the forum was gradually lessened as the LMI instructors became more accustomed to these accents.

Government and organizations

Although the LMI dealt directly with the participants and the instructors, other groups received some benefit as well. After the program, the governments where these participants work will have gained officials that are more confident, professional, and knowledgeable. One example is that the program received some comments from the Thai participants that they had become more confident in speaking English with international officials. In addition to their better performance when presenting in English, the international networks that these participants established from the program may somehow be valuable for their organizations in the future. Having connections might save some time when the participants have questions or problems regarding their work field.

Drawbacks, Challenges, and Limitations

Drawbacks

No matter how well planned we were, some problems inevitably occurred. The different situations in each country could not always be accurately determined. The number of LMI registrations and qualified people requested to be sent for the course by the government organizations were fewer than what was expected. Because of the time constraints and Bangkok's political situation in 2014, some potential people could not join this crucial program. As a result, the number of learners in some of the face-to-face classes was as few as only five when the projected minimum figure was twelve. In addition, the problem concerning the number of participants occurred not

only in Thailand, but also with other countries. This, in turn, had effects on the unequal ratio and unpredictable number of participants in the online learning course. Thus, some online instructors did not get a class when the number of online participants was low or they had to take extra courses when the number was high.

Challenges

Both American and Thai instructors faced many challenges conducting this program, as the following intentionally limited examples represent. In the DL class, matters such as different accents, online class management, and technical issues were challenging. First of all, listening to different accents through an Internet connection even with the help of a microphone and speaker can be difficult. Being a DL instructor, understanding what the participants were trying to communicate was extremely important in order to give them feedback and also to question them. The instructor also needed to make certain that the other participants could understand the speaker so as not to leave anyone behind. The second challenging issue was online class management. Though real-time conversation could occur, the DL instructor could not control the class as easily as a face-to-face class. When some of the participants talked without paying attention to the time or other participants, the instructor needed to step in to manage the class so that the time was equally divided among everyone. The last challenging issue was technical problems. Not only had some of the participants never used technology in an online conference before, but it was also the first time for some of the instructors. Although some of the instructors had practiced beforehand, they still needed to be brought up to speed with newer versions. Every instructor thus had to learn how to use each conferencing program as the technology seems to be continually changing.

Limitations

Two limitations can occur for this type of course: facilities and cooperation from the organization. For example, an organizer and an instructor can provide materials and facilities for everyone during a classroom meeting. However, this is not the situation for online distance learning. It was found that all participants needed to be equipped with their own computer and a stable Internet connection. The other discovered limitation concerned cooperation from the relevant organization in announcing the course to their potential staff. When interviewing people to join the program, we sometimes had to explain the program and its goals to the candidates. Though all of the basic information about the program was written in English and explained in the letter sent out to every organization, appropriate candidates were not always provided; for instance, candidates whose work required them to be prepared for presenting their organizations internationally.

Conclusion

Co-teaching is considered a valuable instruction method that can supply needed attention to participants. In fact, great improvement had been reported to be found in a team-teaching study for Thai high school students (Vega, 2010). In addition, learning presentation skills online offers students some flexibility (Csikosova, Senova & Culkova, 2012). Hence, after months of integrated instruction, one of the goals the LMI program began to form was to help the students weave networks through communities of learning, both within their own country and in the lower Mekhong area through the availability of the Internet. The next LMI phase adopted the three stages of learning and networking together with additional content. Some changes were made after particular challenges were faced, such as a training session for the online instructors. Ensuring that instructors had the necessary skill to facilitate an online class, which can be considered a new role and responsibility for teachers, was found to be crucial (Yang & Cornelious, 2006). Moreover, accepting that no course program can be designed perfectly the first few times, this program used its participants' comments to improve the course with collaborative goals in mind, expecting a better program course design and an increased rate of participants' performance so as to educate and assist the officials as much as possible. Further studies are recommended on this kind of integrated instruction pedagogy in order to enhance understanding of this mixed application in other contexts, apart from the current officials' training context. The more frequently the course is taught, the more experience will surely be gained in order to cope with arising inevitable though unforeseen problems. Further research into this particular pedagogy may lead not only to solutions but also underscore more firmly the benefits to be found in applying integrated instruction which can support the teacher as well as the organization presenting the participants.

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